

# COULDN'T YOU STAY AWAKE?

*SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED*

by Steve Zeisler

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Many Christians learn a wise distillation of Christian theology from the first line of a children's song:

*Jesus loves me! this I know,  
For the Bible tells me so(1)*

The Scriptures witness to the certainty of Jesus' love. What was it that persuaded the New Testament writers of his love so that they would write of it so clearly and passionately? Jesus' words, his interaction with people, his miracles, and his courage through his years of public ministry all demonstrated his love, but that love was experienced most profoundly by the disciples during the final days of Jesus' life, the time that Christians call Holy Week.

Let's consider the text, beginning at Mark 14:26.

**When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.**

**"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written:  
"I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep will be scattered.'**

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

**Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."**

**"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today--yes, tonight--before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."**

**But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you."  
And all the others said the same.**

**They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."**

**Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."**

**Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."**

**Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.**

**Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The**

**hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"**

This passage begins with the remembrance of a hymn. Jesus and his disciples had just celebrated the Passover meal, which traditionally ended with the singing of praises or *hallel* (from which we get the word hallelujah). This time, however, the hymn was a benediction to the end of an era. God himself had visited the planet in all his beauty and with all his love, but the visit was nearing its end.

The more I read the story of the Last Supper, the more poignant it becomes to me. What a tender and beautiful time it must have been--good friends sitting together, talking and praying, experiencing the common fellowship of that table, sharing memories and hopes of being together. A great deal happened in that room that night. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as they entered the room. He urged them to be humble in their service to one another. He stretched out his hand to his betrayer, seated at the table with him. He spoke those remarkable words, "This is my body This is my blood." Never before had Jesus offered himself in such an intimate and profound way

At the end of their time together, Jesus prayed what is perhaps the most remarkable prayer in the Bible (recorded in chapter 17 of John's gospel). Knowing that he could no longer protect his disciples, he commended them into the hands of God. It was an extraordinary evening, and as it ended, they sang a benediction and walked out into the darkness.

Continuing at verse 27, we read that Jesus told them what would happen in the hours ahead. As they walked, Jesus reminded them what the prophet Zechariah had said. He wanted them to know that a time was coming very soon when he would be destroyed and they would disperse in fear and confusion like sheep without a shepherd.

Peter's response is typical of Peter. He is ready to draw his sword to save Jesus from whatever terrible thing is about to happen. "The others may be a bunch of weak sheep, but not me, Lord. We will fight this together." Peter saw the other disciples as sheep ready to scatter, but he saw himself as a shepherd ready to defend the flock and even Jesus himself.

Shepherds in Israel were tough guys. We tend to think of them as serene pastoral types, playing harps and watching their fluffy sheep graze, but in fact, shepherds spent most of their time tending their animals in harsh wilderness and protecting them against predators and other threats. One of the best descriptions of this aspect of shepherding is found in 1 Samuel 17:34-36, where David tells Saul that he wants to fight Goliath. "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God."

We do well to consider context in the book of Zechariah from which this quote is taken. First, look at Jesus' words in verse 27: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered." Zechariah 13:7 actually says, "'Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!' declares the LORD Almighty. 'Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.'" It sounds as if a mysterious sword will awaken to strike the shepherd and scatter the sheep. Jesus added his insight to show that it is God himself who says, "I, God, will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." The reason there is no defense for the shepherd is because the one who will destroy him is his own Father. The shepherd became the sin-bearer for our sakes and had to die. Justice requires a payment for sin, and the God of heaven calls for it to be paid.

Then, in verse 28, Jesus tells them that a time is coming when they will return to Galilee and he will go before them. Once again we see a picture of the shepherd before his sheep. Though Peter only hears the word of the coming tragedy and wants to fight it off, Jesus declares the end of the story is life, not death.

Now let's move on to verse 32. They arrived at Gethsemane, and the Lord told the disciples to sit together while he

prayed. Moving away from the others, and accompanied by Peter, James, and John, Jesus "began to be deeply distressed and troubled." Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases it this way: "He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony." (2) J.B. Phillips says, "He began to be horror stricken and desperately depressed." (3) Suffering terrible sorrow and anxiety, he asked the three to keep watch. There was no requirement of courage at this point. He did not ask them to defend him or do anything heroic. He merely asked them to wait, to stand and keep vigil with him. Peter had said, "I will be a hero for your sake." The Lord replied, "No, you won't, but could you just love me enough to keep vigil? What I must go through now will be very hard, and I need someone who cares enough to be there for me."

Jesus then moved away from the three and began to pray. When he returned and found them sleeping, he said, "Simon, are you asleep? Couldn't you stay awake for even an hour?" Twice again Jesus went away to pray, and twice again he returned to find his friends asleep. He had asked them to keep a vigil with him, and they had failed at even this simple assignment.

I don't know if you have watched over someone you care about or if someone has done so for you, but it is an important thing. When our oldest son was a high-school senior, he had to decide between two fine colleges. The decision was a clear fork in the road; his choice would determine many things about his future. He announced that he was going to go to his bedroom, put the two acceptance letters on the bed, and ask God to help him decide. Though he didn't say so, I knew he wanted me to wait for him, so I did. About 45 minutes later, he emerged with his decision. He didn't ask for help, and he didn't need my advice. He just wanted me to be there when he came out, and it was a privilege for me to stand watch for him.

Our daughter had cancer surgery a few years ago. We were just as scared as she was, but there was nothing we could do. We couldn't take her place on the table or help the surgeon, but she knew we would be there when she regained consciousness. It was important to know that, no matter what happened, someone cared enough to be there and to not go away, to not fall asleep.

In like manner, Jesus wanted his friends to stand watch. They heard him praying. They knew the difficulty he was in. They had never before seen him so burdened, so desperately in need, yet they fell asleep.

Consider verse 36. Only Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus addressed his Father as Papa. The Aramaic word, *Abba*, is a tender word of trust and nearness. There is formal language to indicate "father" as someone who is powerful and capable and demanding, but Jesus' use of *Abba* shows him drawing near to the one who could hold him in his arms and make everything okay. "You can do anything. You can take this cup from me. Will you?" This is the ancient struggle of believing people: "How can God be all-loving and all-powerful, yet allow me to suffer? He must not really love me after all. Maybe it is all a sham." This same struggle is at the heart of Jesus' prayer. Luke 22:43 tells us that an angel came to strengthen him, but we read nothing of a response from the Father. God the Father turned his back on the sin bearer. "Papa, you can do anything. Won't you please take this cup from me?" There is no answer. As he ends his prayer, Jesus says. "Not what I want, but what you want." Obediently, he chose to endure what was necessary in order that we might be saved.

I'd like to make a couple of points about the choice Jesus made. First, it may well have been the near and obvious weakness of his disciples, their desperate need for a Savior, that strengthened his resolve to go to the cross. He endured the cross because of his love for them. Therein lies the wisdom of the children's song: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." This is the heart of the biblical message. The Bible tells us of Jesus' great love because the gospel writers saw his great love for them that night. They wrote what they knew so that we could know the same thing. In their inadequacy and failure and selfish cowardice, Jesus loved them enough to die for them just as he loves us enough to die for us.

The other point is that Jesus wanted desperately to avoid the cross. This is important because it is easy to think that Jesus never sinned because he just never particularly wanted to. Jesus' struggle with obedience at Gethsemane helps us to better understand Hebrews 4:14-15, which says that Jesus is a faithful high priest because he knows what we are going through. There is no temptation unfamiliar to him. He personally experienced the profound

desire to disobey God; yet he overcame that desire, and that is why he is able to come to our aid when we are tempted.

Finally, the struggle was over. Jesus had wrestled with God, and he had chosen to obey. The words in verse 41 are filled with love and sorrow: "Are you still sleeping?" The hour had come, the betrayer had arrived, and there was no hope for weak disciples aside from a savior who would provide new righteousness for them. Without Christ's sacrifice, they could never be different, and neither can we.

The disciples were eyewitnesses to the great love of Christ. Eventually they would understand much more about him--that he died not just for them but for the whole world, that the plan was far bigger than they could comprehend when they were in the Garden of Gethsemane, that this one, who had been in the garden with them was, in fact, the eternal, divine Son of God--and they would go on to tell the world of incarnation, Emmanuel, "God with us." John would write that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Some day he would write these things about the Jesus he followed, but he didn't know them on that night in the garden. Peter would write in 1 Peter of salvation and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He would realize that this battle at Gethsemane and on the cross was an enormous victory over the terrible forces of wickedness and that, in the resurrection, Jesus would claim his place at the right hand of God. Some day Peter would know these things, but he didn't know them on that night in the garden. What he and John and the other disciples did know is that Jesus saw them at their worst and loved them anyway. However often they failed him, he would never fail them. And because they personally experienced Jesus' great love and wrote about it, we can read their words and say, "Jesus loves me! this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

#### NOTES:

1. Anna Bartlett Warner, "Jesus Loves Me."
2. Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message*, 1993, Nav Press, Colorado Springs, CO.
3. Phillips, J.B., *The New Testament in Modern English*, © 1958, 1959, 1960, 1972 (Revised Student Edition). Macmillan General Reference, a Simon & Schuster Macmillan Company, New York, NY.

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Catalog No. 4668  
Mark 14:26-42  
16th Message  
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March 12, 2000

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