

Shepherd and Sheep

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

This is a familiar story. It is a well-known account of Peter, specifically his denial of Jesus. Peter is most commonly known for his impulsiveness. Even the impetuosity of his behavior. He speaks and he acts before he thinks. And he says some foolish things, including the occasion when Jesus rebuked him for Peter's unwillingness to accept Jesus' own prediction of his suffering and death.

Mat. 16:22 Then Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Peter is the one who drew his sword in the defense of Jesus and cut off the right ear of Malchus, the Jewish High Priest, who had come to arrest Jesus. Jesus' response was simply this,

John 18:11 "So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?"

Mat. 26:52 "But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? 54 How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?"

Today, however, we come to the most grievous of Peter's foolish and impulsive actions, for here in our text, he is not defending Jesus, as foolhardy as that might have been. And he is not recoiling against the possibility that Jesus would suffer and die. Instead, he represents human weakness while, at the same time, displaying the grave danger of human self-confidence.

What does he do? He denies Jesus. Not once, but three times. And that, despite the very specific and personal warning from Jesus regarding that very thing.

Peter's example is a sober warning to all of us, a warning against this very dangerous and prevalent temptation to rely upon ourselves, to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, and to depend upon a sense of our own strength rather than to trust in the perfect strength that God alone can give to us as we live by faith.

Before we look at that personal example of Peter, we will begin first with a very general focus. The focus is upon our identity as God's people as sheep. Let me emphasize clearly, that image is not complimentary. Sheep are rather dumb animals, dull of mind, particularly with reference to danger. They are also very stubborn animals, pursuing a chosen path with little or no inclination ever to change their mind. They follow the crowd, the herd, the rest of the flock. That is something of a protective quality, somewhat by instinct, since sheep are not exactly a species of animal able to fight and defend themselves individually. I could say more about sheep, but again for emphasis, all these traits are rather uncomplimentary to sheep by comparison to many other animals. And, that is the emphasis with which I want to begin this afternoon. We are sheep!

Psalms 100:3 "Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture."

Thus God is presented as a shepherd, his work of salvation defined by that role as a shepherd.

Ps. 80:1 "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who lead Joseph like a flock; You who dwell between the cherubim, shine forth! 2 Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, Stir up Your

strength, And come and save us! 3 Restore us, O God; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!”

So it is that,

I. AS FALLEN CREATURES, WE ARE SHEEP IN NEED OF A SHEPHERD.

It is plan in the Bible that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is the one upon whom this role as shepherd is most clearly focused. Even in the prophetic words of the prophet Micah, quoted by Matthew,

Mat. 2:1 “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 6 ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

Thus, as Jesus approaches the time of his death, in one of his last lessons for his disciples, he emphasizes their need for a shepherd. Actually, he warns them of danger.

A. Sheep will scatter without a shepherd.

v.31

They will stumble. The ESV puts it, “You will all fall away because of me this night.” The Greek word comes into English as “scandalize.” Ultimately, the reference is to apostasy, to denial, to

fall away. To stumble and fall! Because of Jesus, because of his death, the necessity of his death. That will be the stumbling block, the offense of the gospel that for some people, remains to this day.

1 Cor. 1:21 “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

So Jesus is the stumbling block, Jesus is the offense of the gospel, because the gospel declares that Jesus died, he was crucified, and only in that way are we able to be saved. We are not saved by our own self-confidence, which will be the focus of my second point this afternoon with reference to Peter. But here, more generally, note this propensity of sheep to be deceived. To stumble. To scatter, because of what Paul would call the foolishness of the gospel!

And Jesus proves his point by quoting from the prophet Zechariah.

v.31 “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

Sheep without a shepherd will be scattered. They will succumb to the dangers they face. They will die. So it is, we need a shepherd. Let’s look at that prophecy in Zechariah 13. It is a warning of judgment, judgment against those who rebel against God and against his authority. But that judgment will also

bring the gospel of salvation to those who don't rebel, and so Jesus' quote from Zechariah is directly on point. The warning of judgment to those who reject the shepherd and scatter, but with that warning, the consistent invitation of the gospel itself.

Zech. 13:1 "In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness. 2 "It shall be in that day," says the LORD of hosts, "that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they shall no longer be remembered. I will also cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land. 3 It shall come to pass that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who begot him will say to him, 'You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the LORD.' And his father and mother who begot him shall thrust him through when he prophesies."

Then the specific quotation from Matthew 26,

Zech. 13:7 "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion," Says the LORD of hosts. "Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered; Then I will turn My hand against the little ones. 8 And it shall come to pass in all the land," Says the LORD, "That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, But one-third shall be left in it: 9 I will bring the one-third through the fire, Will refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; And each one will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"

"Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered." That will happen. That is to say, Jesus will be struck, he will be killed, crucified. That is the nature of sheep. That is the nature of fallen creatures. We need a shepherd, and that warning of judgment in Zechariah, and on the lips of Jesus, is also a promise of salvation and redemption.

Again, verse 8, "And it shall come to pass in all the land," Says the LORD, "That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, But one-third shall be left in it: 9 I will bring the one-third through the fire, Will refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them. I will say, 'This is My people'; And each one will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"

So this reference to the scattering of the sheep is a promise of the good shepherd. Still in Zechariah, notice how the shepherd is identified in verse 7, "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion."

The idea there is that this companion is a reference to Jesus, the companion or associate of God the father himself, the one in the closest possible relationship to the Father. Thus the shepherd who be stricken is Jesus, and all of that is a reference to Jesus' death, a death he died as the atoning sacrifice for our sins! So God himself strikes the shepherd. God the Father strikes his only beloved son unto death, the death required as the penalty and punishment of our sins.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

1John 4:9 "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

And Jesus understood all of that, didn't he?

John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. 12 But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. 13 The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. 15 As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.”

So we read the great benediction of,

Heb. 13:20 “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Back in our text, this message of the gospel is plain and clear as well.

v.31 “Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ [But then notice] 32 But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.”

The point is that,

B. The good shepherd brings life to the sheep.

He will be struck, put to death. But he will be raised from the dead as well. And that’s the point of the reference to going before the disciples to Galilee. He is alive! And with his life, he brings

life to his sheep! Clearly this too is a fulfillment of that great prophecy of,

Is. 53:3 “He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

We need a shepherd. And we cannot depend upon ourselves. The danger of that is shown so clearly by Peter.

II. AS FALLEN CREATURES, WE MUST BEWARE THE DANGER OF SELF-CONFIDENCE.

So, Peter.

v.33

I’ve tried to emphasize the chief error of Peter, his primary sin. Self-confidence. And,

A. The foolish arrogance of self-confidence is displayed.

Foolish arrogance. I think that is the best way to describe it. Self-confidence, in some contexts, is a good thing. Or at least neutral. But not in relationship with God. There is no room for self-confidence when it comes to our own perseverance, for we persevere only because it is God who preserves us. We are faithful in love to God only because he, first of all, is faithful, to love us. In fact,

2 Tim. 2:13 “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”

Peter displays a moral failure found in many of us, and note the other disciples joined Peter's boast in the foolish arrogance of self-confidence.

v.35

Far better the humility of the Apostle Paul's self-awareness found in,

1 Cor. 15:9 "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am."

Paul continues, to be sure, confident of God's work in him, but the focus is upon just that—God's work, not his own. So Paul continues,

1 Cor. 15:10. "...and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

When it came to a sense of his own accomplishments, Paul would write this,

Phil. 3:2 "Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, 4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. 7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness,

which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

Peter, of course, here in our text in Matthew 26, had no such humility, and I have included in our study this afternoon verses 69-75 in order to demonstrate that,

B. The spiritual consequences of self-confidence are exposed.

So we read,
v.69-75

There is what self-confidence will do to you! There are the consequences of thinking yourself strong, in the strength of your own power and wisdom. There are the consequences of arrogance, an arrogance founded upon your own sense of accomplishment and achievement. All of that self-confidence is destroyed the moment you yourself are threatened. A servant girl came to Peter first, and he cowered. He was unwilling to be identified with the Jesus who was being delivered over to death. Then a second time he was identified as a follower of Jesus, and he failed again. The third time we read even further of his failure, the intensity of that failure of his own strength,

v.74 "Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!"

He was, at that point, broken by his sin, which was, of course, Jesus' intention and purpose. Peter would remain one of the apostles, the foundation upon which the church would be built. But to be an apostle, to be found faithful in that work, Peter had to lose his own self-confidence. He had to be broken of his own

arrogance and foolishness. He had to learn to trust in Jesus, not in himself. So we read,

v.74b “Immediately a rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So he went out and wept bitterly.”

So where is your strength? Where is your confidence? Where is the certainty of your life to be founded? There has to be only one answer to all those questions, and the answer is Jesus. Your answer has to be that you are a sheep, and that God has provided a shepherd, a good shepherd. And that is the confidence that allows you to proclaim with the full confidence of true faith what David declares in,

Ps. 23:1 “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever.”