

No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 12 - DOXOLOGY

TEXT: MATTHEW 26:30-35 (ESV)



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December 7, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Thursday Night

For over fourteen weeks now, we've been making our way through a study of the last days of Jesus' earthly ministry prior to His crucifixion. We've followed Him from Palm Sunday's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to His teachings, healings and confrontations in the temple in the subsequent days to His more private moments with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, in Simon the Leper's house and most recently here in the Upper Room. We've seen tensions rise as the plot to arrest Him has taken shape. We've heard His parting words and His displays of grace and consolation to His disciples.

What we've been doing is we've been studying the last moments of Jesus' life as a free man. Having the advantage of hindsight, we know where all this is going—a perspective His disciples had only a hazy notion of at best. Today we're at the half-way point of this series. The aim of this first half has been to follow Jesus up to His arrest. Here we come to the last walk He would ever take with His disciples prior to the Cross. As they leave the Upper Room and begin their walk to their customary meeting place in the Garden of Gethsemane,^(Lk 22:39) we see once again Jesus has never stopped extending His grace to His people.

Matthew 26:30-35

³⁰And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'³²But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

³³Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

When They Sang A Hymn

Fourteen weeks ago when we started this series, there was one verse—one clause, really—which captured my attention and filled my head with all kinds of wonder and excitement. I knew it wouldn't come until we reached the end of this half, and it has taken everything in me to wait because every time I think about this little turn of a phrase, I think of Jesus telling His disciples, "No one takes my life from me, but only I have authority to lay it down and the authority to take it up again."^(Jn 10:18)

I have been captured by the strength of Jesus. In fact, if you were to ask me what my biggest take-away from this series has been so far, I would say it has been the picture of the strength we've seen in Jesus in every situation He's faced over the past five days. He has been laying down His life with authority. His unflinching resolve has left me many times over awestruck.

Then we come to this text—and to this one little clause—and I find myself again captured by the strength of Christ. What is the clause that has held my attention for over three months now? "When they had sung a hymn..." Mark also includes this detail.^(Mk 14:26) I read this line and wonder, How did that go down? When Jesus and His twelve disciples sat down to this supper, John tells us Jesus was deeply troubled as His mind was on Judas and his intent to betray Jesus.^(Jn 13:21) We know from Luke that by the time Jesus knelt to pray in Gethsemane later that night, His anxiety had only grown. These details give bookends for Jesus' emotional presence that night. He started the meal deeply troubled and by the time He arrived in the garden, His stress had escalated to the point where His pores were releasing blood mixed with sweat—a condition known as hematomidrosis.

So what happened between those emotional bookends leading up to this hymn? Jesus washed His disciple's feet.^(Jn 13:1-20) Somewhere in there, probably as the disciples were jockeying for the best seats at the table, Jesus had to silence an argument among them over which one was the best.^(Lk 22:24-30) Then through His sorrow, He said one of them was about to betray Him.^(Jn 13:21-30) Soon after, Judas left to do just that. During the meal, Jesus broke bread and poured the cup, telling His friends it was His body and blood He was offering up for them.^(Mk 14:22-25) Then He prayed for them, and for the work God would do through them.^(Jn 17) It was a high priestly prayer, a confession of the imminent change only hours away now.

He knew they couldn't stay in that upper room forever. Judas was preparing to meet Him later. He knew His next move was to go to the garden to wait. It was time. But they wouldn't leave before joining in a hymn together first. Now imagine this. Since Jesus was the head of the meal and thus the master of ceremonies, it was He who led this song—a doxology. Historians and scholars say they probably sang from Psalm 118, the last of the Passover Psalms. The refrain of this Psalms is "His steadfast love endures forever." I want to read the last verses of Psalm 118 and ask you to imagine it. Imagine Jesus rising to His feet, asking His friends to do the same. Imagine a singing Savior coming to these words as the last item on His agenda before heading for Gethsemane. Imagine Jesus singing:

²²The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵Save us, we pray, O LORD! ²⁶Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! ²⁷The LORD is God, he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar! ²⁹Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!"^(from Ps 118:22-29)

The theme of the night was God's provision of a Lamb to die in the place of His people. And the people sang—and Jesus sang, "Bind the festal sacrifice with cords up to the horns of the altar." Just as Jesus is the Lamb, He also plays the role of Shepherd here this night. He never stops caring for His disciples—preparing them for what's coming. He sets the tone for them. Have you ever been so upset or bothered that you didn't even feel like praying? Have you ever had such a rough week you just didn't feel like going to worship on Sunday? Have you ever had an experience with a ministry or other believers go wrong after which you promised yourself you'd never do that again?

Often Jesus teaches with His words. But here He teaches every single believer without saying a thing. Would you have felt like singing to God in this moment? We are a people who believe our mood should have some say in whether or not we need to worship or be in fellowship with other believers—as if difficulty, fractured relationships or previous bad experiences are not only valid reasons to withdraw from the church or from prayer, but we presume they're excuses Jesus sympathizes with.

James said, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." (Jas 4:8) I love that the example Jesus leaves us with here in His greatest hour of trial is that He drew near to God. I love that, given the circumstance, He didn't declare the whole Passover a misfire and end by saying, "Usually we'd end in song, but I'm too upset." When we might have turned inward, Jesus turned Godward. Why? Because God "is good; His steadfast love endures forever." And by His actions Jesus shepherds His friends, and also us.

After J Am Raised Up

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. As they walked, He said, "You will all fall away because of me on this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.'" This little conversation that ensues is saturated with the Gospel. What was the purpose of telling His disciples that they were all about to fail miserably? Was this just Jesus showing off His knack for predicting the future? No, this was an awesome display of loving concern for His friends.

He knew they weren't equipped for what was coming. It'd be too much for them. They were going to do the unthinkable—abandon Jesus in His greatest hour of need. So what does Jesus do? He names it. But see the nurturing way He does it. He says, "You'll fall away **because of me.**" What's coming their way wouldn't be if they hadn't spent the past three years following Him. Their pending failure, He says, was predicted by the prophet Zechariah long before their character had ever been tested. (Zech 13:7) Their failure to love Him well has been as much an inevitable part of this story as everything else they've seen.

But He adds that when He is raised up, He will go before them into Galilee. See the Gospel here! Jesus assures them their failure will not be enough to overrule His call on their lives. He's saying, in essence, "You're going to flee for your lives when I am captured, convicted, scourged and crucified. But I will rise from the grave and go ahead of you. I'll see you in Galilee." The Good Shepherd is leading His disciples through the valley of the shadow of death here. Jesus tells us, "You will mess up. Sometimes you'll do the unthinkable. But you are still mine, and I still mean to use your lives for the purpose for which you were called—to be fishers of men." Your weaknesses and failures can't drain away the power of His grace or overrule His call. Why? Because "His steadfast love endures forever!" (Ps 118:27, 29)

Before the Rooster Crows

Peter, however, was not one to let this go unchallenged. So he spoke up; "Even if all these other guys fall, I won't." He wasn't lying. Peter believed with all he had that he'd be the exception. He was an earnest man who spoke with his hand on his heart. When he saw Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee, he got out of the boat to walk toward him. Peter loved Jesus and no one, not even Jesus, could question his loyalty to his Lord. But Peter didn't know his own weakness. Jesus said, "Peter, before the rooster crows at dawn you'll have already denied me three times." But Peter wasn't having it; "Even if I have to die, I will not deny you!" Matthew tells us all the disciples said the same.

Who among us hasn't said of some transgression, "I'd never do that!" while a part of you knows your mouth is writing checks your will can't cash. As adamant as you are, deep down there's a tinge of uncertainty that maybe you are capable of this thing you swear you'd never do. Self-confidence is tough so long as it isn't tested. But the trial always seems to yield the verdict. Peter will be tested and he will fail Jesus. So will James, John, Andrew, Bartholomew, Simon the Zealot, James the younger, Philip, Matthew, Thaddeus and Thomas. So will you. So will I.

The Psalm says the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Endure is a durable word. Throughout the course of this night, Jesus has been preparing His disciples for what comes after He is struck down and they scatter. Though Peter and the others insist it isn't in them to abandon Christ, He knows it is. He knows He will be struck and they will scatter. But He also knows it is precisely because it is in them, as with us, to abandon their Lord that He must be struck in the first place. It will be by His death that their failures and denials will be forgiven.

Christ did not die for people who didn't need Him to. He died for the weak who insist they're strong, for the loyal ones whose loyalty crumbles when tested. He died for the usually successful who end up failing; for the self-sufficient who discover that they sometimes lie to themselves, or at least miscalculate what they can actually deliver; for the powerful who when challenged, fabricate false identities because they fear the consequences of the truth—like Peter who cursed at a young girl who asked him later this very night if he wasn't one of Jesus' followers as she thought she remembered. (Jn 18:17) He died for the put-together person with the past that clings to you like a tattoo spelling out all the evil you've done or the evil that has been done to you.

You have something to sing about today. The steadfast love of the Lord endures **forever**. The festal sacrifice was bound to the horns of the altar and offered up so the judgment of God would pass over you, as sure as it was passed on to the shoulders of Christ. He has called you to bear witness to His grace. What is grace if you can nullify it by needing it. Jesus knows His people and He knows them as His own. This is what the Last Super was about—His life for ours, and ours being then joined to His.

The message to God's people in this text is not, "Jesus died, so you'd better not mess up." It is that He died because you mess up worse than you imagine. But He knows your weakness better than you know it, and He tells you today there's grace when you fail, because He has a purpose for your life that is bigger than just not messing up. His call on the lives of His people is to bear witness to His grace and love and mercy. Just as there is nothing you can do to overrule His grace and love and mercy, there is also nothing you can do to annul His call to testify of the grace and love and mercy you've found in Him.

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