The successful Shepherd and His failing sheep

Text: Mark 14:26-52

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**Scriptures:** Zechariah 13:7-9; Mark 14:26-52

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 73b, 337, 266, 218

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#49)

**Theme:**  On the Mount of Olives Jesus prophesies His death by the judgement of God, suffers greatly in the Garden of Gethsemane, and is captured by the Jewish authorities whist His disciples reveal their persistent failures, leaving Him alone as they all scatter.

**Proposition:**  Our many failures do not define us if we trust in the success of Jesus.

**Introduction**

I do not like to fail. Do you? I do not like making a sustained and consistent effort to succeed only to suffer defeat because I did not, or could not, reach a goal that I was aiming for. Personal failure makes me feel a range of uncomfortable, unpleasant emotions include shame, disappointment, sadness, anxiety and embarrassment. How do you feel when you fail? We all fail at times, some more frequently than others. If someone says that they have never failed, that person has failed to look at themselves clearly. Some people fail publicly, others privately. I think we all much prefer private failure out of the spotlight, than public failure in full view of many others!

As we come to three events that took place on the Mount of Olives on the Thursday evening before the Friday when Jesus would be killed, we see what looks like the failure of Jesus:

1. As a Shepherd, He is going to be struck by His Heavenly Father and all those who followed Him will be scattered.
2. As a man, He is going to experience deep distress and trouble of soul so that He will ask His Heavenly Father to change His mission so that He could avoid the pain of the cross.
3. As a truly innocent victim, He will be betrayed and captured.

If you were reading Mark’s gospel for the first time, hearing about the life of Jesus as new information, our text today would seem like a series of big failures for Christ. The truth is that Jesus Christ is the most successful human being ever to have lived. He never ever failed. Not so for His disciples. Their failures are certainly many, including over-confidence in themselves, unbelief, denial of Christ, lack of watchfulness, and cowardly abandonment of their Lord. We’ll see this in our text today under three headings:

1. Jesus prophesies but the disciples lack faith
2. Jesus suffers but the disciples are not vigilant
3. Jesus is captured but the disciples abandon Him
4. **Jesus prophesies but the disciples lack faith (verses 26-31)**

Some people think that the gospels were made up by the followers of Jesus who wanted to spread lies and myths so that they could keep the ‘Jesus movement’ going despite the embarrassing death of their leader. The Apostles were greatly used by the Lord, becoming foundational for the New Testament church (Eph 2:20), yet the four gospels all clearly record how much they failed before the resurrection of Christ. Would the Apostles have been involved in the fabrication of these gospel accounts that present them as such persistent failures? I don’t think so.

We’ve already seen in Mark’s gospel that Jesus’ twelve disciples lacked faith when He stilled a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee (4:35-41). They did not understand the meaning of Jesus’ miracle when He fed four thousand people (8:21). When Jesus began to teach the disciples plainly that he ‘must suffer many things’, ‘be killed, and after three days rise again’ Peter began to rebuke him (8:31-32). When Jesus spoke again of his coming death and resurrection, the disciples did not understand him and were afraid to ask (9:31-32).

Before He entered Jerusalem, he told two of his disciples that they would be permitted to borrow someone’s a young donkey for him to ride into the city. And so it was. Similarly, the two disciples who were sent by Jesus to find a large upper furnished room for their celebration of Passover ‘*found it just as he had told them*’ (14:16). Jesus taught with an astonishing authority unlike the scribes (1:22), He demonstrated absolute power of the physical and spiritual realms. All this to say that Jesus had shown His Word to be consistently and completely reliable. There was every reason for the disciples to trust Him and believe what He said.

At the start of our text, Mark writes these words: *“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.’”* (v26-28). Here Jesus quotes a prophecy from Zechariah 13:7 “‘*Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me,’ declares the LORD of hosts. ‘Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones.’”* This is a profound prophecy – probably the clearest revelation in the Old Testament of the suffering both of Christ and His church.

Shepherding was the main occupation of the nomadic Israelites in the early days of the patriarchs as they cared for their flocks of sheep and goats. In Scripture, the term ‘shepherd’ came to refer, not only to those who cared for animals, but also to kings who protected, guided and provided for their subjects (2 Sam 5:2). In the days of Jeremiah, the Old Testament leaders of Israel were unfaithful leaders, “‘*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: ‘You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them’*” (Jer 23:1-2).

Yet Zechariah prophesied about the Lord’s chosen servant Shepherd ‘*the man who stands next to me*’ who would suffer at the hand of God. As a result, those in His care would be scattered because they would all ‘fall away’. Peter disagreed, putting himself ahead of the other disciples “*Even though they fall away, I will not*”. Here Peter failed not only by being over self-confident, proud and hasty in speaking, but He also showed unbelief. His unspoken thought was something like ‘Jesus has said it, but I don’t believe it!’ In response Jesus added: “*Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times*.” (Mark 14:30-31). Spoiler alert if you are hearing Mark’s gospel for the first time, Peter did exactly what Jesus predicted. Skip ahead to verse 66-72 to read of the man we could call ‘The Rock’s (Matt 16:18) very public failure. To say that was embarrassing for Peter to have denied Christ is a vast understatement, Mark records that Peter broke down and wept when he realized how much he had failed (14:72).

Peter had failed to believe Christ’s Words and relied instead on his own ideas, judgements and self-evaluation, the other ten disciples there on the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper also similarly failed. Mark records in verse 31 “*But he {Peter} said emphatically, ‘If I must die with you, I will not deny you.’ And they all said the same*.”

It was possible for the 12 disciples to sit under the shepherding, teaching and guidance of Jesus for the years of his public ministry and yet still disbelieve His words and trust instead in themselves. Likewise, it is possible for people like us who regularly sit under the teaching and guidance of God’s Word and are shepherded by the Elders of the church (1 Peter 5:2) to disbelieve the Word of Christ and instead to trust in ourselves, rather than test everything by the standard of Scripture. Like Peter, we might deny the truth of this, and think that we are stronger and more committed to Christ than our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Word of God warns us all: 1 John 1:8 “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*”. Therefore each of us needs to be watchful, as we heard from Galatians 6:1 “*Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted*”. I think for many of us, we are better at watching others than watching ourselves. We can spot the failures of other people with what we often think is pin-point accuracy, but be blind to our own faults. Jesus puts this sad reality in this question for each of us to carefully consider: “*Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*” (Matt 7:3).

Keeping watch brings us to our second point.

1. **Jesus suffers but the disciples are not vigilant (verses 32-42)**

There was olive orchard at the foot of the Mount of Olives called ‘Gethsemane’ which means ‘olive press’. It wouldn’t have been the only estate in the area with an olive press, but this is the particular name this olive grove had. For us the name ‘Gethsemane’ rightly brings to mind, not a machine for extracting olive oil, but the accounts in both Matthew, Mark and John’s gospels of the suffering of Jesus there before His death.

Was it there in the garden of Gethsemane that Jesus failed to accept the mission that God the Father had given Him? No. Certainly not. What we see is the ‘success’ of Christ in ‘*making himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*’ (Phil 2:7). Jesus is fully human and what human being would not feel dread at the prospect of the pain of the cross to come? We might think about the physical agony of the extremely slow death of a crucified man or woman. We might think of the shame of an innocent man, stripped naked as a convicted criminal and subject to abuse from passersby. But this is **not** where the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane is focused.

Look at the plea of Christ in verse 36 “*Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me*”. You may well know that ‘Abba’ is an Aramaic word used by a child to his or her father. It conveys strong relationship, intimacy, trust and dependence. Jesus affirms the absolute sovereignty of God His Heavenly Father and their perfectly close bond with one another. The word ‘cup’ enables us to understand the primary cause of Christ’s great suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane where ‘*he began to be greatly distressed and troubled*’, saying to the three disciples there with him ‘*My soul is very sorrowful even to death*’ (v34). The ‘cup’ Jesus speaks of is not a physical container, it is a metaphor –figure of speech -comparing the righteous wrath of God poured out to a drinking cup. This cup of God’s wrath is referred to as a cup of staggering or reeling in Psalm 60 verse 3 and in Isaiah 51:17.

The primary source of Christ’s deep distress was the prospect of being forsaken, abandoned, by His Heavenly Father as He suffered under the full weight of God’s righteous fury against the sins of His people. In Gethsemane, Christ was tempted by His perfectly human fear of what was to come, to avoid the cross. He could have failed there, but instead He succeeded, saying “*Yet not what I will, but what you will*” (v36). Christ’s voluntary submission has saved people like us, who are tempted and fail repeatedly in our lives. The Apostle Paul would later write of the perfect humanity and success of Christ in these words: “*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8).

Now let us look at the three disciples there in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus that night: Peter, James and John. Jesus said to them ‘*Sit here while I pray*’ (v32). As he experienced that great sorrow of soul, about which Luke would write, ‘*being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*’ (22:44). Jesus said to them ‘*remain here and watch*’ (v32). The Greek word translated ‘watch’ means to be on the alert, in a constant state of readiness. It speaks of diligent focus and vigilance. In Bible times, watchmen would stand on the walls of cities or on tall towers to scan the horizon for the approach of enemies.

Was Jesus then asking the three disciples to stand guard for Him in case a crowd of his enemies came and tried to capture Him? That seems plausible, until we read verses 37 and 38. “*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.’”* Jesus did not want His disciples to remain vigilant so that they could stand guard and protect Him, but so that they could resist the temptation to fall away. As the Good Shepherd, His concern here is not for Himself, but for His flock. Remember that He said, “*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve*” (Mat 20:28).

The disciples were sleepy. They were not watchful, not vigilant. They ignored the spiritual danger they faced. A restored, wiser, more mature Peter would later write: “*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith*” (1 Peter 5:8-9). Now that is the ‘voice of experience’!

We all need physical sleep, but there is a time to be alert and awake (like, for example, when listening to a sermon or driving a car!) When we face the temptation to fall away from trust in Christ and to fail Him, we need to be spiritually alert, and keep watch on ourselves. Jesus was alert at Gethsemane, but his disciples were not. He succeeded, they did not. This pattern continued as Jesus was arrested, as we’ll see in our third point:

1. **Jesus is captured but the disciples abandon Him (v43-52)**

As we’ve worked our way through the gospel of Mark, we’ve seen how careful Jesus was to conceal His identity at first. He ‘*would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him*’ (1:34). When He miraculously brought the dead daughter of a synagogue ruler back to life, ‘*he strictly charged them that no one should know this*’ (5:43). When He healed a deaf man, ‘*Jesus charged them to tell no one*’ (8:36). When Peter said, ‘You are the Christ’ (8:29) ‘*He strictly charged them to tell no one about Him*’.

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, He began to predict His coming death and resurrection (8:31-31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). He then entered the city publicly as the people welcomed Him as their King saying, ‘*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!*’ (11:9). Yet each evening He left the city to stay at the village of Bethany about three kilometres away, returning on each subsequent day. It was safer for Him not to be in Jerusalem at night because ‘*the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him*’ (14:1). Jesus was careful to use an upper room to celebrate His last Passover with His disciples at a location that was not publicised. He wanted to protect Himself until ‘the hour’ had come for Him to be captured.

So, did Jesus fail on the Mount of Olives and ‘let His guard down’ so that His enemies could creep up on Him and snatch Him unawares? No. Certainly not! Jesus knew exactly what would happen, when and where. He had said before ‘*The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him*’ (9:31; also 10:33). As we see from verses 43-50 of our text, Jesus did not resist those who ‘*laid hands on him and seized him*’ (v46). Jesus did not rebuke Judas Iscariot for bringing a large crowd with swords and clubs to arrest Him. Jesus went to the cross ‘*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter*’ (Isa 53:7. This is also how He was arrested. He was purposefully passive, not using His supreme power over the physical and spiritual realms to protect Himself. All He said was “*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*.” (v48-49). The Scripture Jesus had in mind may well have been Zech 13:7. Jesus did not protect Himself from capture on the Mount of Olives any more than He had shielded Himself from Sunday through to Thursday during the day in Jerusalem.

The choice by Judas Iscariot together with the chief priests and scribes to betray Jesus with a kiss and capture Him under the cover of darkness showed their failure, their sin and their wickedness. It also showed the failure of the disciples. Yes, someone drew a sword, presumably to defend Jesus, and he cut off the ear of a servant of the high priest, but all the disciples left Him and fled (v50). There was a young man also following Jesus, who Mark records managed to escape by running away naked (v51). Many have suggested that this could well have been Mark the gospel writer himself, since he was from a wealthy family in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and could have therefore afforded a linen garment - clothing not worn by what we might call the middle or poorer people in society. So the disciples all failed Jesus and scattered like frightened sheep.

It is a sad and seemingly hopeless story that Mark records as he describes these historical events, and yet there is good news here. Look with me at verses 27-28 where Jesus prophesies:

*“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.’”* Jesus promised that He would go after His sheep as the disciples returned to their homes in Galilee following His death and resurrection. He would gather them again to Himself, forgiving, restoring and equipping them so that in His success over death and sin, they would be successful in gaining eternal life and also in proclaiming the gospel.

So where do you and I fit into this? We are not exactly the same as the disciples, nor do we live at the unique stage of history that they did, physically walking with Christ. But we are more like them than we might care to admit. We also fail in many ways including:

1. over-self confidence in ourselves – yet the Scriptures warn us “*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned*” (Rom 12:3).
2. Unbelief – we do not always take Christ at His Word. For example, He says “fear not” repeatedly (e.g. Matt 10:31; Luke 12:32; Rev 1:17).
3. Denial of Christ – we deny our association with Jesus when we are ashamed to be known as Christians, unwilling to speak about our faith, unwilling to stand up for the truth of God’s Word. Jesus says, “*for whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*" (Mark 8:38).
4. Lack of watchfulness -we can be guilty of spiritual sloth, not being alert to the dangers of temptation, to spiritually alert, but sleepy. “*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted*” (Gal 6:1-2).
5. Cowardly abandonment of the Lord. What does leaving Christ and fleeing from Him look like?

It can be unbelief, backsliding, or persistent unrepentant sin, but it can also be leaving His body the church. It can be unwillingness to serve the Lord and His people. It can be being absent from the worship and fellowship of God’s people. We all fail in some or all of these things from time to time, some of us more than others. We need to see our failures, accept responsibility for them and then turn to Christ, the truly successful Good Shepherd, in repentance and faith. We need to whole-heartedly believe that He will restore, provide and protect us just as He did for the 11 disciples who returned to Galilee.

The good news is that our many failures do not define us if we trust in the success of Jesus. He has been struck by the righteous wrath of God against the sins of many. He was willingly obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. No one took His life from Him; He laid it down of his own accord (John 10:18). He calls any who will hear His voice to come and receive the benefits of His complete success, saying:

“*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*.” (Matt 11:28-30).

AMEN.