

20250921 Salvation And Fiery Trials

(Mark 14:27-31, 66-72)

Last time, I talked about how salvation is not a single event but a journey of faith. Today we will look at Mark 14: 27-31 and 66-72, and see a key theme on the journey – the trials.

Talking about trials, most of us would feel somewhat uncomfortable. After all, trials are not pleasant things. But they are very much needed, because we often have delusional overconfidence. The May 2018 issue of the Digital Learning magazine featured an article by Jeffrey Young. The article quoted a research report on the quality of education among US university professors. The results show that more than 90% of professors rate themselves as above-average teachers. And two-thirds believe they're in the top quarter. The math obviously doesn't add up. The article argues that excessively high self-esteem hinders efforts to improve college teaching.

Professors—those with PhD—are among the most intelligent people in society. If even they can fall into delusional overconfidence, how much more might the rest of us be prone to the same problem?

The delusional overconfidence is also a big problem in Christian's spiritual life. We must realise that growth can only happen when we face reality and have a true understanding of ourselves.

Today's passage tells us that God will help us see the realities about ourselves. We will reflect on three key points: **the Plan, the Problems, and the Trials.**

1. The Plan — God's plan of salvation.

In verse 27, Jesus told His disciples, "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 will be scattered.'" Here, Jesus quoted from Zechariah 13:7-9, which prophesied the events to happen when God's final salvation comes.

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.
⁸And 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.' "*

The shepherd here refers to Jesus Christ. The text says that it is God's plan that not only will He strike Jesus

Christ but will also bring fiery tests upon the “little ones,” the little ones being the disciples who follow Jesus. The result of the refining is that they, the little ones, will be strengthened in the covenantal relationship with God. Quoting Zechariah, Jesus tells the disciples about God’s refining plan. The verb “stumble” is in passive voice, which is “be made to stumble”. God allows Satan to test the disciples to the extent that they will fall away. But even during their failure, the Lord’s grace never leaves them. He will restore them. Their Shepherd will lead them and keep them. In verse 28, Jesus says that after His resurrection, He will go ahead of the disciples into Galilee. In the Bible context and Jewish tradition, the saying “going ahead of them” is actually an imagery of a shepherd. Jesus is saying that after all these, the disciples will continue to experience Jesus’ guidance in the covenantal relationship.

It is God’s plan to bring His people through trials. In trials, God’s gracious hand will keep His people. It applies to all of us without any exceptions. The fire-like refining process is similar to the process of removing impurities from gold and silver when these are refined. But what are these impurities? Now, let us look at “the Problems”.

2. The Problems – Peter’s problems and ours

Let us look at Peter’s problems, for they are our problems too. Verse 29, after Jesus had said that they would all fall away, Peter said, “Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be.” But the Lord Jesus repeated it saying “Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times.” Then Peter spoke even more strongly, “If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” Here we see two problems: 1) Peter’s trusting in himself, and 2) His not trusting in Jesus.

The first problem is Peter’s trust in himself. Today’s culture teaches us to “believe in yourself,” “you can do anything,” and “don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” No wonder 2/3 of the professors believed they were in the top 25%. It is a delusion, a lie. It is like looking into a funhouse mirror—you see a version of yourself that looks far bigger and stronger than you really are. Such delusional self-confidence is the biggest barrier to people getting salvation. Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). And Proverbs 16:18 warns us, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

The second problem – Peter’s not trusting in Jesus. Though Jesus warned him twice, Peter did not believe it. He insisted that his loyalty to Jesus was very strong. Peter’s overconfidence happened when he was with Jesus and the other disciples. When we gather together at Church on Sundays, we are surrounded by believers. We worship God. We hear God’s words. In this environment, we might feel that “I am good”, or “I am determined to follow Jesus, even if I have to die for Him”. Even when the Bible warns us, we still think we are ok.

Now, here is something that every one of us need to know: God’s plan of refining His people is precisely to remove these two problems: trusting in ourselves and not trusting in Jesus.

3. The Trials – The Fiery Refining Trials

That night, Peter was faced with an enormous trial. Under the pressure, Peter denied Jesus three times. He was suddenly confronted by the reality that he was not as strong as he had thought. He was, in fact, quite bad. But why “three times”? Wasn’t a one-time failure enough to let Peter know that he really was not as strong as he thought he was? Well, the Lord decided to use three events to peel off the outer layers of the

onion, revealing how bad it really was inside.

Let's look at the first event. Peter was in the same courtyard as Jesus. Peter was warming himself by the fire. A servant girl came and looked closely at Peter and said to him, "You also were with Jesus of Nazareth." It was just one girl. But Peter replied, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about!" The double negative language Peter used shows that his denial was strong and firm; it is no, no! After this first incident, Peter might have thought, "Oh, that's bad". But perhaps it was that the girl just caught him off guard? Or maybe he had suffered from a momentary slip of his tongue, resulting in him denying his Lord? To avoid further danger, Peter sneaked out to the porch. The rooster crowed. Did Peter hear it? Did he realise what he was doing? Did he cry? No, he did not. He did not repent; instead, he moved to a safer place.

Now comes the second event. According to Luke's account, it took place "after a little while." This time, the pressure that Peter faced was higher. It was not just one girl. This time, she turned to a group of men standing there and said, "This man also is one of them." She accused Peter publicly, in front of the crowd. Peter again denied that he was with Jesus. The Greek verb for denying is in the imperfect tense, indicating an action that was ongoing. Peter kept denying again and again. The first event might have caught him off guard. However, there was some lapse of time between the first and the second incidents. When he sneaked away to the porch, it was hard to imagine that he did not think about how he should respond if this was to happen again. We see that the second denial was not a slip of the tongue, but an intentional decision. Peter knew he was bad; in fact, he was worse.

Now the third event. According to Luke, it happened about an hour later. This time, the pressure that Peter faced was even higher. It was not the servant girl, but a group of men who confronted Peter. This time, Peter began to call down curses, and he swore to them, saying, "I don't know this man of whom you speak." To swear and to call down curses means, "If what I am saying is not true, may God curse me." Peter was determined to protect himself, no matter the cost. Peter was not just worse. He was at his worst at the core.

At that moment, the rooster crowed a second time, as if saying to Peter, "Now you see how deep your depravity is!" Peter broke down and wept. Peter's willpower, self-confidence, and pride all fell to the right down to the bottom. He realised his reality. He saw the total depravity in his flesh. Now, it is only when we see the total depravity of the flesh that we are made ready for the good news, "blessed are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God". Only when a person sees his depravity can they be saved. If we say we are "still okay," what we are really saying is, "In that ok part of my life, I don't need Jesus." That is the biggest problem for us. But that is not the whole story yet.

Let us step back a little and look at it. We realise that all of these occurred in the context of the New Covenant. The texts before and after the story of Peter's disowning the Lord, are the passages about Jesus obeying the Father's will to face the unjust trials. And all these are sandwiched by the passage of the Lord's Supper and the crucifixion. The author uses this symmetric structure to tell us that fiery trials are there to remove the impurities that can be found in God's people, which is accomplished through the obedience and death of Jesus Christ, "through Jesus' righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. And by Jesus' obedience, many will be made righteous." It is a divine exchange— Jesus takes our sin upon Himself and gives His righteousness to us. That is how the Lord brings us into a covenantal relationship.

It is in God's plan that His people should face fiery trials. It happened to Peter, and it happens now to every one of us. Let me share with you another story of a tough trial and stumbling. This is my story.

About 20 years ago, I was actively serving Jesus in the workplace. I worked hard to be a good testimony for Jesus. I had a Bible study group in the company where I worked. Everything I touched, God blessed. The

small group attracted many people in the company. The business I was running also prospered. Although I remained humble in front of people, in the back of my mind, I was thinking, “I can do this!” It’s the same problem as Peter. Then the trial came.

The company had a new VP for Asia Pacific on board. He had a reputation for a bad temperament and talking in harsh manners. One day, I had a business review meeting with him through teleconferencing. The General Manager of China was in the meeting with me. As I presented my business strategy and plan, he disagreed strongly. His words became harsher and harsher until he was shouting, “How could you be so stupid?” I began to lose control. I guess my face turned red. The blood flushed to my head. I wanted to shout back, “Who do you think you are? Who gives you the right to talk to me like that?” The China GM, seeing that I was about to explode, stood up, put his hands on my shoulders, and pressed my shoulders firmly. That got me back to my senses. I managed to calm down and finish the presentation. I later thanked my boss for saving me. Walking out of the meeting room, I was so ashamed. I felt that I was a bad testimony. In the small group, I had been talking about loving others with the love of Jesus, as well as responding to negative situations with a positive mindset, that is, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” But in this situation, I had almost done just the opposite. I realised that I had a problem. I was not as strong as I had thought, and my love is so fragile. But that was just the outer layer of the onion. The Lord started peeling it more.

Ten minutes later, the VP called me on my cellphone. He apologised to me for the way he talked to me. He said he was sorry for responding negatively before hearing out my plan. And he said my plan was actually good. At that moment, in my heart, I had such a nice feeling, “Yeah, the VP apologised to me!” Then the Holy Spirit revealed to me my deeper problem. I realised that my sense of value was based on people’s approval, not on my identity in Jesus and God’s love. The false sense of value was an idol. I was worshipping an idol!

In the meeting, I responded in my own way, not trusting in the Lord. Actually, I forgot about Jesus altogether. But the Lord did not forget me. My boss used his hands and saved me. In fact, I am in the bigger hands of the Lord. He made me stumble, and He restored me in His salvation.

We all face trials. Peter, after all the trials in life, wrote this: “In all this (salvation), you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)

To summarise, we see three things: 1) God’s Plan—that He refines His people so that they may be strengthened in the covenantal relationship. 2) Our Problem – that we often trust in ourselves and don’t trust in the Lord. 3) The Trial—that through the fiery test, God make us realise our depravity. And then He restores us in Jesus.

You may be going through trials of different kinds—conflicts at work, unfair treatment at school, struggles in marriage or parenting. If you have been standing firm in the trial, remember this: “It is not I, but Jesus who lives in me.” If you stumbled, do not be surprised, for God uses even our failures to teach us the most important lesson of faith: first, do not trust in ourselves, because nothing good dwells in my flesh; second, trust in the faithful Lord and rely only on Him.

Our faithful Lord, the author and finisher of our faith, will keep us in the journey of salvation and will get us to the promised land, into the Kingdom of God. We give all the praise and honour to the Lord. Amen!