

The Shield of Faith and Jesus Christ the Same

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The Lord's Distress in Gethsemane — A Different Kind

Matthew 26 records the night before the crucifixion. The Lord had instituted the supper of remembrance, gone out to Gethsemane with His disciples, and there began to be sorrowful and deeply depressed — a word that speaks of great distress of mind. He said to His closest disciples: My soul is very sorrowful even unto death. And He prayed three times: My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me — but not as I will, but as thou wilt.

It would be a serious mistake to read this as clinical depression or the kind of discouragement and anxiety that we commonly experience. The Lord's distress was of a completely different character. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that He, in view of the joy lying before Him, endured the cross, having despised the shame. There was joy before Him — the joy of what His sacrifice would accomplish, the redemption of a people who would be His. But being made sin — bearing God's judgment on sins not His own, He who was holy and sinless — caused great distress of mind. The cup He was being asked to drink was the cup of wrath against sin, and to drink it He had to be made sin. That is what caused His sorrow.

The Lord's distress was not from the contradiction of sinners against Himself. Hebrews 12:3 tells us to consider how much contradiction from sinners He endured so that we be not weary and faint in our minds. He endured that without His spirit failing. What caused His distress was the doing of the Father's will — specifically, what that will required of Him. Every time He prayed, His answer

was the same: Thy will be done. He did not have faith in Himself. He had faith in His Father.

Peter's Weeping — A Different Distress

The contrast with Peter could not be sharper. Peter had said with complete confidence: if all shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended. If I should needs die with thee, I will in no wise deny thee. His confidence was in himself — in his love for the Lord, in his courage, in his willingness to go to any lengths. And within a few hours he denied the Lord three times, and went out and wept bitterly.

What caused Peter's weeping was his own failure, and more precisely the recognition that his boasting had been hollow. He had trusted in Peter, and Peter had proved untrustworthy. The Lord looked at him at the moment of the third denial, and that look broke him. The tears were real and right — God was using them to chasten and restore. But they were nothing like the Lord's distress in the garden. One was the grief of holiness being made sin. The other was the grief of self-confidence exposed.

The Lord had told Peter beforehand: I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not. Not that thou wilt not deny me — but that thy faith will not fail. The shield of faith is what the enemy was attacking, and what Peter lacked in that moment was not love for the Lord — he had that — but faith in God rather than confidence in himself. Ephesians 6:16 calls the shield of faith that with which we shall be able to quench all the inflamed darts of the wicked one. The enemy attacks faith. That is his target.

The Shield of Faith — What It Protects Against

Peter's failure began well before the courtyard fire. It began in the words if all shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended. That was not faith in God.

That was high thoughts of self. The man who has genuine faith in God says something different: I know my weakness, I know I am capable of anything, and I am asking God to give me strength not to fail. That is what faith in God sounds like.

In the courtyard, when the circumstance became real — when it was clear that the Lord was about to be railroaded through a puppet trial and executed — Peter felt fear. The same thing happening to the Lord might happen to him. The fiery dart of the wicked one found its mark in a soul whose shield had been fashioned out of self-confidence rather than God-confidence. Fear replaced faith, and the denials followed.

The enemy attacks faith because everything else depends on it. Obedience, dependence, endurance under trial, hope for the future — all of these flow from faith. A soul whose faith is intact can bear the most severe circumstances without failing. A soul whose faith has been undermined will fail even in comparatively mild circumstances. This is why the Lord said He had prayed specifically that Peter's faith not fail — not that his circumstances would be easy, not that he would not be tested, but that the one thing that could sustain him would hold.

Joseph — Years in Bondage and the Shield of Faith

Psalm 105:17–22 gives us God's summary of Joseph's life: He sent a man before them — Joseph was sold for a bondman; they afflicted his feet with fetters, his soul came into irons — until the time that his word came about; the word of Jehovah tried him. He was a boy or young man when his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. He was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison. He interpreted the dreams of the butler and the baker — and the butler forgot him for two years. The appointed time came, and Pharaoh called him, and he was set over all Egypt.

In Genesis 50:20, standing before the very brothers who sold him, Joseph says: ye indeed meant evil against me; God meant it for good, in order that he might do as it is this day to save a great people alive. That is the summary of years of slavery and false imprisonment. Not a word of bitterness. Not a word of complaint against God. The circumstances had been caused by the cruelty of his brothers, fanned by the enemy of souls. But Joseph's faith was not in his circumstances. It was in God, whose purpose ran through all of it and could not be frustrated.

The testimony around him in Egypt was that God was with him. Potiphar saw it; the prison keeper saw it; Pharaoh saw it. He became the most trusted man in each environment because the Lord was with him and because his character, which was the fruit of his faith, was consistent across the years. He did not need to start a political campaign or find attorneys to appeal his false conviction. He made himself useful where the Lord had put him, and the Lord brought him out in His time.

Ye indeed meant evil against me; God meant it for good, in order that he might do as it is this day to save a great people alive. — Genesis 50:20

The Road to Emmaus — Eyes on Circumstances, Not on the Lord

Luke 24 gives us two disciples walking to Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, described as downcast. They had staked their hope on the Lord Jesus — we had hoped that he was the one who was about to redeem Israel. And then He had been crucified and had died. Reports were coming in that the tomb was empty, that angels had been seen, that some of the women said He was alive. But Israel had not been restored, and that was their measure of success. Their focus was on the circumstance, not on the Lord.

The Lord was there with them and they did not recognise Him. He walked beside them, asked what they were discussing, listened to their account of their lost

hopes, and then — beginning from Moses and all the prophets — interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Their hearts burned within them as He spoke. They were receiving exactly what they needed, and they almost let it end at the village — he made as though He would go further — but they constrained Him: stay with us, for it is toward evening.

At the table, when He took the bread and broke it, their eyes were opened and they recognised Him. And He vanished. And immediately they rose up and returned the seven miles to Jerusalem — no longer downcast, no longer walking away from the place of blessing — to find the eleven and report that He was alive. The risen Lord had opened the Scriptures, and the Scriptures had opened their eyes, and the place of blessing was no longer the wrong direction.

This is the pattern of recovery from discouragement. Not more information about circumstances, not better analysis of what went wrong, not a resolution to feel differently. But the Lord Himself, opening the Scriptures, turning the eyes from what seems to have gone wrong to what He has said and what He is doing. The disciples on the road were not wicked; they were believers who had lost their focus. The one thing needful was that their focus be restored to Him.

Jesus Christ the Same — Yesterday, Today and Forever

Hebrews 13:8 contains eight words that are sufficient for every circumstance, every trial, every season of difficulty or uncertainty: Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever. The world around us changes constantly. Governments change. Technologies change. Social structures change. The things we depended on prove unreliable. The people we trusted disappoint. The health we had becomes uncertain. And through all of it, the one thing that does not change — has not changed, cannot change — is Jesus Christ.

When Joseph was in Potiphar's house and then in the prison, God had not changed. When David was a fugitive, anointed king but driven from Jerusalem,

God had not changed. When Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, God had not changed. When Paul was beaten and imprisoned and shipwrecked, Christ had not changed. He was the same — yesterday, today, and forever. And that is what sustained each of them, and what produced in each of them a testimony that the surrounding world could not explain.

In 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul warns that in the last days perilous times shall come. We are in those times. The ruin of Christendom was already underway when Paul wrote his last letter, and what is it now? But notice what Paul gives Timothy for stability in those perilous times: doctrine — Paul's doctrine, the whole counsel of God committed to him including the truth of the one body and the head in heaven; person — the Lord Jesus Himself, the central figure throughout the epistle, appearing in the expression in Christ Jesus seven times; and Scripture — the sacred writings which are able to make wise unto salvation and are profitable for doctrine and correction and instruction in righteousness.

The central one of these three is the person. Doctrine matters and Scripture matters — but the person of Christ is central. In Him everything is secure. The great anchor of the soul enters into that within the veil where Jesus our forerunner has gone. It does not matter what is happening outside. What matters is that Jesus Christ is the same, that He is there, and that the anchor holds.

Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever. — Hebrews 13:8

When Balaam's donkey saw the angel of the Lord in the way, Balaam did not. He was so absorbed in his own agenda that the Lord's direct intervention was invisible to him until the donkey spoke. We can be like that — so caught up in what is going wrong, so occupied with the problems and the changes and the disappointments, that we do not see the Lord's hand at all. The answer is not more analysis. The answer is to look at Him — the same, yesterday and today and forever — and to let that unchanging reality be the shield of faith that quenches every dart the enemy throws at us.

