

Scripture ties the survival of the church on earth to the ministry of intercession: our Savior interceding in Heaven on our behalf (Hebrews 7:25), the Spirit interceding within us with inexpressible groans that He joins to ours (Romans 8:26), and the saints on earth taught to pray the very words of God by the Apostles in their letters. For example, could there be a more urgently needed and perfectly timed prayer for us to pray than Ephesians 3:14-19?

I bow my knees before the Father ... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

This week we will consider Peter as an example of miraculous deliverance-through-prayer and note God's convicting use of His Word in Peter's life through the ministry of John the Baptist.

Monday: Read Luke 22:31-34 & Mark 14:26-50

Healing through Honest Assessments

Led by the Apostle Peter, the disciples boldly contradicted Jesus when He predicted that they would all fall away (Mark 14:29-31). This is an affront not just to Christ Jesus, but to the prophet Zechariah, who in chapter 13 verse 7 predicted, "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered."

When it came to their weakness and sin, the disciples believed God was wrong to pronounce their infidelity through the prophet and wrong to warn them through His own Son. They all protested that they would not scatter!

But then events began to sweep away their smug assurance. They went to Gethsemane and could not even stay awake one hour with their suffering Leader. All resolve to stand by their Master quickly dissipated before Judas' mob. They all scattered as the Scripture had said (Mark 14:49-50).

Powerless to halt unjust proceedings in the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:53-65), Peter hung in the background, impotently seeking to show loyalty. Such a weak show of courage is what would get Peter in trouble.

Meditate and Pray: How important it is to keep our view of ourselves and our own abilities brutally honest and devastatingly simple. Let us learn to say "yes and amen" to Scriptures' verdict that *we are not trustworthy or dependable in ourselves*. All our worthiness, faithfulness and truthfulness comes from Christ in us the hope of glory. Sing about depending on Christ to be the only source of our strength and integrity, using this hymn from Isaac Watts:

1 Let me but hear my Savior say,
"Strength shall be equal to thy day;"
Then I rejoice in deep distress,
Leaning on all-sufficient grace.

2 I glory in infirmity,
That Christ's own power may rest on me;
When I am weak, then am I strong;
Grace is my shield, and Christ my song.

3 I can do all things, or can bear
 All sufferings, if my Lord be there;
 Sweet pleasures mingle with the pains
 While his left hand my head sustains.

4 But if the Lord be once withdrawn,
 And we attempt the work alone,
 When new temptations spring and rise,
 We find how great our weakness is.

Tuesday: Read Matthew 26:30-35; John 13:36-38 & Deuteronomy 8:1-3

Led into Humility

It is noteworthy that God saw fit to record in all four Gospels the sad testimony of each Apostle's pride in claiming they would never betray Christ. Why were Peter and the others so stubborn, contradicting their LORD and proudly asserting their own self-righteous courage?

One answer is that Jesus Christ, as His Father before Him had done, set up a test for His disciples. This was necessary to expose *what was really in their heart*. Deuteronomy 8:2-3 is a description that could really be applied to Christ's handling of His young, proud and spiritually ignorant disciples:

And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Meditate and Pray: May we value and pray for the LORD's penetrating, cutting work of the crucifixion of our pride and self-reliance as believers. He must go down into the hidden area of our selfish motives to expose the depths of our depravity. Just as David, after his sin, learned with new force to proclaim how far short he fell of the God who "desires truth in the inward parts" (Psalm 51:6 KJV) so Christ ordains, for His own holy purposes, that we at times will fall. Only then do we discover our sinfulness and our 24/7 need for God's daily, forgiving grace.

How does the Westminster Confession of Faith (chapter V, paragraph 5) put it?

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

Wednesday: Read John 1:35-42; Mt. 16:13-18; Lk. 22:31-34 & Mk. 14:66-72

Confident Cutting

Christ's certainty that Simon will, in the end, be a "rock" [the translation for Peter] on which He can build His church (John 1:42). This is because of our Lord's confidence in His saving, sanctifying, and preserving work in the lives of His children. Christ is not appealing to Peter's own personal character, however. We do not exalt Peter as some do, as the first pope or founder of the Church, any more than we exalt any Bible character other than the Lord Jesus. Rather, by comparing to Matthew 16:17-18, we see that Christ is highlighting Peter's *confession of Christ as the Son of God*. This confession of faith will be the "rock" on which He will build His Church. However, how bold of Christ to change Simon's name to Peter, declaring to all that He would change Peter's cowardly, selfish, wavering character into something lasting, faithful, and enduring.

Here is where Satan enters the picture. How the evil one must have rejoiced at the opportunity to give the lie to what Christ said about Peter. When Satan asks to "sift Peter as wheat" (Luke 22:31) he is asking to shake Peter to his core and winnow away all that Peter had stood for, thereby proving to the world that his profession of faith in Christ was all "chaff." But the Christ who will test Peter and permit his humbling fall is also the Savior who prayed for Peter's forgiveness and restoration. And what is the proof that Christ's prayer for Peter is answered? We see the answer in Mark 14:72. When Peter heard the rooster crow, he remembered the word of Christ that predicted his three-fold denial and went out and wept bitterly.

Meditate and Pray: There is simply no substitute for Christ's surgical cutting away of our pride in order for us to see ourselves as we truly are. May the LORD help us to learn the painful but essential wisdom of Psalm 141:5:

Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head;
let my head not refuse it.

Thurs/Friday: Read Mark 14:26-31, 37, 47, 66-68 & John 1:32-42.

Preparing the Way for the Lord

Peter's lapses in courageous faith are shocking. He first denied that he would forsake Christ at all (Mark 14:29), then he fell asleep when Jesus warned him to watch and pray (Mark 14:37), and then he sliced off the ear of the high priest's servant (Mark 14:47, compared to John 18:10). Finally, he denied knowing Christ publicly, three times. We grieve at Peter's pride that so disappointed his LORD and Savior and caused the other Apostles to stumble from his bad example.

But it could have been worse. We are mercifully spared from beholding the *original* monstrous pride of Simon Peter *had he not come under the influence of John the Baptist*. His brother Andrew was a disciple of John (see John 1:35) and when Andrew found his brother he expressed with joy the fruit of their Messianic search: "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41).

Why would such a Messianic search be "top of mind" in Andrew's words to his brother? Andrew doesn't merely say to his brother, "We have found an interesting rabbi, why don't you tag along to hear him too?" He refers clearly to the Messiah having been found – something learned from John's witness! Now, we must admit

that there would be many triumphs and failures in the discipleship wanderings of the Apostles, especially Simon Peter. But how hopeful it is to see the good start the Spirit began under the Baptists' ministry.

In sum, I think we can infer that *the search for the Messiah by Andrew and Simon was a search which John the Baptist sparked in these brothers' hearts*. It was the Baptist who declares that he had been sent to "prepare the way" for the coming of the Messianic King. As John 1:23 says, John was the "voice" in the desert going before Him. How wonderful that both Peter and Andrew heard his prophetic voice and were thereby stirred to seek the Messiah and His power to deal with their sins and to bring in God's Kingdom.

Meditate and Pray: Let us give thanks for the ministry of John the Baptist in pounding home the message of repentance into the hearts of Israelites who came to him from every place. John pointed away from himself and told all who came to him, "Prepare for the coming of the LORD" (Isaiah 40:1-3).

Let us also give thanks that Simon heard this message from the Baptist and his brother Andrew, along with John (probably the second disciple in John 1:35). May God by His Spirit use His Word to prepare the hearts of many more in our day by first of all convincing them of their sin and then prompting the beginning of their search for the Savior. And may He be found by them!

Saturday/Sunday: Read John 1:15-18; John 1:29-36 & John 3:22-30

Behold the Lamb

John the Baptist did not just convict the people of sin. He also pointed to Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29 & John 1:35). In this phrase, "Lamb of God," John was pointing to the meaning of the whole Old Testament sacrificial system. In this one picture of the lamb without blemish, God highlighted the beauty and winsomeness of His own Son. Could there be a more beautiful animal in all creation for Jesus to be compared to than a lamb, so meek, pure, and humble?

In other words, John led his disciples to seek Christ by directing them to His beauty and winsome grace. This is another reason that John was so confident that he would decrease and Christ would increase (John 3:30). He believed in the beauty of Christ to draw sinners in a way no merely human prophet could. All human prophets, like Moses (John 1:17), faithfully applied the law of God to the people's sins, yet they all would fade before the Savior who was "full of grace and truth."

Let Jonathan Edwards words on the beauty and excellency of Christ close our Bible notes for this week:

When we are delighted with flowery meadows, and gentle breezes of wind, we may consider that we see only the emanations of the sweet benevolence of Jesus Christ. When we behold the fragrant rose and lily, we see His love and purity ... When we behold the light and brightness of the sun, the golden edges of an evening cloud, or the beautiful rainbow, we behold the shadows of His glory and goodness; and, in the blue sky, of His mildness and gentleness ... Christ is so often compared to these things, and called by their names, as the Sun of Righteousness, the morning star, the rose of Sharon, and lily of the valley, the apple tree among the trees of the wood, a bundle of myrrh, a roe, or a young hart.

Meditate and Pray: Father, you sent your meek, pure and vulnerable Lamb, knowing that He would bear all our sins and the devastating punishment of your righteous wrath. May we rejoice in His beauty, purpose and victory and may we be content to decrease as you increase in all things.