Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

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Struggling Faith, Mark 14:26-31, 66-72

In April 1988 the evening news reported on a photographer who was a skydiver. He had jumped from a plane along with numerous other skydivers and filmed the group as they fell and opened their parachutes. On the film shown on the telecast, as the final skydiver opened the chute, the picture went berserk. The announcer reported that the cameraman had fallen to his death, having jumped out of the plane without his parachute. It wasn't until he reached for the absent ripcord that he realized he was free falling without a parachute. Until that point, the jump probably seemed exciting and fun. But tragically, he had acted with thoughtless haste and deadly foolishness. Nothing could save him, for his faith was in a parachute never buckled on. Faith in anything but an all-sufficient God can be as tragic spiritually. Only with faith in Jesus Christ dare we step into the dangers of this life.

Unfortunately the skydiver didn't realize that his faith was not secure before he jumped. In contrast, we know the One we are counting on for a safe landing. But, even in knowing Jesus in faith - Do we ever struggle with our faith? Jesus often scolded his disciples for having too little faith. In our passage Peter has faith, he has a parachute but his cowardly behavior reveals he never buckled his parachute and is free falling. It is easy to point out Peter's struggling faith, but how does his story cause us to reflect upon times when we have struggled with our own faith?

Commentary Lesson

The drama of the Last Supper draws us into the paradox of what is about to happen. One who has been close to Jesus will be involved in the plot to destroy him, and Jesus' own disciples are too weak, frightened and struggling with their own faith to suffer with him. But the Gospel of Mark does not let us forget that the story continues beyond the cross. The death of Jesus is a covenant sacrifice that establishes a new community, and the risen Lord will gather the disciples.

Peter responds to the predictions of suffering the way most people do: He tries to deny them. Knowing the honor of friends or disciples deserting their teacher, he tries to deny that he would ever do such a thing. Yet Jesus has continually reminded the disciples that denial of suffering is not the route to life. Only those who deny themselves find eternal life (Mark 8:34-38). Peter's adamant denials are triggered by another misconception as well. He thinks that Jesus' death will mean the end of the road and that his own denial of Jesus would be the end of their relationship. Given Jesus' predictions, however, we know that neither perception is true.
Peter strongly denies the reality that he will deny Jesus before the cock crows. Yes, Peter struggled with his faith. But the reality is his faith was so much more bold and courageous than a thousand other people. I believe that too often we give Peter a difficult time because he struggled with his faith and he did the unthinkable he denied Jesus. But let's face it. We all have our breaking point. Peter reached his breaking point. However, before we hastily condemn Peter, let's ask ourselves - would we have done likewise under the same stress and pressure? Have we ever denied Jesus in word or deed? Even more remarkable is that as we carefully consider the beginning of the Gospel of Mark which states that he got his information from Peter. Thus, Peter was the one who shared this powerful and embarrassing story of how he fell away from Jesus.

There is a lesson in the word that Jesus used for "fall away." The Greek verb is scandalized which meant the bait in a trap. Peter was too sure and over confident that he would not ever fail Jesus. William Barclay points out that Peter forgot the traps that life can lay for the best of people. He had forgotten his own human weakness and the strength of the devil's temptations. It is easy to think that Peter and the disciples should have believed what Jesus told them and not have struggled as they did with their faith. They had plenty of evidence that whatever Jesus said was true. If we step back from the story into our own human experience we recognize how difficult it is to accept the fact that a loved one is going to die. It is difficult enough when the person is already very sick, but, when he or she appears to be healthy, it is almost impossible to accept. The situation is even more incomprehensible when the ailing person has always been in charge, always the strong member of the family, the rock and stability to lean on and solve other people's problems. The reality of Jesus' suffering and death was a struggle for Peter and the disciples to understand and accept that this was God's plan. Let the person condemn Peter who has never broken a promise, who has never been disloyal in thought or action. Peter had faith in Jesus, and even if his faith failed, it rose again.

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