

# We Are Weak, but He Is Strong

Matthew 26:33-35

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**Main point:**

## **Introduction:**

It was in North Korea, in the 1950s, in the village of Gok San that Pastor Kim and 27 members of his underground church were discovered by the Communist regime. The Christians were arrested and tried before a crowd of thousands. The officials demanded that they publicly “deny Christ, or you will die.” They refused. They would not deny Him.

The officials then brought several of their children out, prepared ropes, and told them that they must deny Christ, or they would hang the children. The parents looked at their kids and told them that they would see them in heaven. They would not deny Christ—and the children were hanged.

Next, the officials brought in a steamroller and the Christians were given one more chance to deny Christ. They refused, and began singing the hymn, “More love to Thee, O Christ, more love to Thee”<sup>1</sup>—and they were crushed and killed.

Through all of this, their commitment to Christ did not waver.

Accounts like this one abound throughout Christian history—men and women and even children standing strong and refusing to deny Christ, even to death. And some of us have wondered, if I were in a similar situation, what would I do? And it is easy for us to think or assume we would be strong and never deny Christ.

But maybe we need to be more honest with ourselves. Have I ever, or do I ever, shrink back from declaring my allegiance to Jesus because I’m afraid what others might think of me? Do I ever choose sinful behaviors so that I can fit in, or not be harassed? If I fail in those kinds of situations, how well would I do when faced with far worse consequences?

In our text today, we will learn about the dangers of self-confidence, the extent of our weakness, and how our only hope lies in trusting solely in the strength of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Prentiss, More Love to Thee, O Christ

## Context:

It is the night that Jesus will be betrayed. In just a matter of hours, Jesus will be given up by Judas, arrested in the Garden, tried, beaten, and crucified. Jesus has just celebrated the Passover with His closest friends, His disciples, in which He explained the significance of His own upcoming death—that through His self-sacrifice, He is inaugurating the promised New Covenant for the forgiveness of sins. Everything changes with His death.

Now, having eaten and sung psalms of praise for God's deliverance of His people, Jesus has taken His disciples from the upper room and is heading to the Mount of Olives. And on the way, He stops them in their tracks with verse 31:

- **Matthew 26:31**—You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, "I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED."

Jesus had predicted His death several times to His disciples before. But now He involves them. What will happen to them in the wake of His persecution and death? What will they do? According to the infallible Word of God, they will be scattered—they will run; they will abandon their Shepherd.

And Matthew draws a sharp contrast in these last few chapters—a contrast between the strength and resolve of Jesus, over and against the weakness and unfaithfulness of His disciples. And as the contrasts build up, we begin to see more and more how much we need Him as our Savior, and we see how He is the only One who can possibly save.

Yet, despite what they do, Jesus' love for them does not change. He knows they will do it. He knows it will be deeply painful for Him when they do. And He would be totally justified in abandoning them. But what does He say:

- **Matthew 26:32**—But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.

Jesus doesn't wonder about His resurrection; He assumes it; knows it; is confident that He will be raised. And when that occurs, He will meet His disciples, the same ones who abandoned Him. His love for them, and His love for you, doesn't change when we are faithless and when we fall. He remains faithful.

And so, we pick up in this same scene; this same dialogue between Jesus and His twelve disciples. Peter cannot contain himself, and so he speaks. And in this exchange between Peter and Jesus, we are taught two very practical lessons:

- A. Beware of self-confidence, for you are not all that you think you are. (v.33)**
- B. Believe Jesus' assessment of you, and not your own assessment of yourself. (v.34)**

## Exposition:

### A. Beware of self-confidence, for you are not all that you think you are. (v.33, 35)

<sup>33</sup> But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away."

Jesus has affirmed that He, the Shepherd, will be struck down, and that His sheep will be scattered. The disciples understand what Jesus is saying about them—that things are about to get hot, and when they do, they will abandon Jesus.

And they—especially Peter—cannot accept what Jesus says about them and their commitment to Him.

<sup>34</sup> Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.

And when Jesus corrects him, Peter doubles-down,

<sup>35</sup> Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You."

The first thing to be said is that Peter is being honest here. He truly does love Jesus; and in his mind and heart, he is wholly committed to Him. But Peter tended to speak and act before he thought.

This, of course, is not the first time Peter has objected to something Jesus has said or done. In Matthew 16, Jesus tells them of the death that He must die, and Peter rebukes Jesus. "*God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you*" (Matt.16:22). In John 13, Jesus begins to wash their feet, and Peter objects, "*Never shall You wash my feet!*" (John 13:8).

However, we can be too hard on Peter sometimes. After all, he just seems to be saying what the other disciples are all thinking, as verse 35 affirms.

And so, he says to Jesus, quite confidently, "*I will never fall away.*" That is, "I will never abandon you in any way, shape, or form. I am committed to You completely, Jesus."

And notice how he phrases his objection, "*Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.*" In other words, "Jesus, you may be quite right about the others. Everyone else may, indeed, abandon you. Their commitment to you might not be strong enough when the heat is turned up. But, you know Lord, that my commitment is strong enough. Above all others, I'm with you.

This is spiritual self-confidence. This is trusting in your own strength to hold fast to Jesus.

Why does Peter say this? What reasons did Peter have to be confident in himself? He may be remembering:

- Dropping his nets to follow Jesus
- Being part of Jesus' inner circle—a witness to the transfiguration
- Being the only disciple who jumped out of the boat to go to Jesus in the storm (and walked on water, thank you very much—perhaps conveniently forgetting the sinking part)
- Being commended by Jesus for his confession in Matthew 16 (perhaps conveniently forgetting Jesus' "*get behind me Satan*" rebuke)

In his own mind at least, Peter was spiritually strong. His commitment to Jesus was unwavering, proven over the last three years. It could not be broken. Just look at his commitment to the ministry and his personal spiritual successes.

### Application

And we can fall into the same self-confidence trap. We can look to our own spiritual discipline or involvement in ministry and begin to think much of ourselves.

- "I have read through the whole Bible six times—therefore, I am spiritually strong and have good reason to be confident in my commitment to Jesus."
- "I pray for one hour every day, come to every prayer meeting—therefore, I am confident in my commitment to Christ."
- "I have served in the Children's Ministry for years now—therefore, I am spiritually strong and confident of my commitment to Jesus."
- "I am an elder at this church, clearly others see it—therefore, I must be spiritually strong and who could question my commitment to Jesus?"
- "I come in every Saturday to serve—therefore, my faith is strong."

And we find ourselves thinking or saying things like, "How could they do that? I would never do that; not me."

We like to remind ourselves of our spiritual successes, and we conveniently forget the innumerable times we have fallen on our faces. And not only that, we often fail to recognize that any spiritual "success" was all due to God in the first place, not us.

- **Romans 15:18**—For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed.
- **1 Corinthians 3:6**—I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. (*Cf. 2 Cor.3:1-6*)

Have you overcome some temptation? If so, praise God, not yourself.

Have you led someone to Christ? If so, praise God, not yourself.

Have you encouraged or admonished a brother or sister in Christ, and seen the fruit in their lives? If so, praise God, not yourself.

We need to beware of self-confidence, for we are not all that we think we are.

## B. Believe Jesus' assessment of you, and not your own assessment of yourself. (v.34)

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

Jesus' assessment of Peter's spiritual strength is a lot different than Peter's own assessment. Peter places himself above the others in his unswerving loyalty and commitment to Jesus, but Jesus singles Peter out from the other disciples as being set for an even greater fall than they. "They will fall away; they will be scattered; but you, Peter, will deny Me."

### 1. The certainty of his fall

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you"

Though Jesus may have been touched by Peter's declaration of love and loyalty to Him, He had to set the record straight. "*Truly I say to you*," is a statement that Jesus used frequently to preface certain statements. In fact, Matthew alone records Jesus saying it 30 times, with this occasion being the last time. And whenever Jesus said these words, He was trying to emphasize something extremely important, and often something that He knew would be difficult for people to believe. A truth that might shock them to hear.

*"Truly I say to you"*—"Though it is difficult for you to believe, listen to what I am saying, because what I am saying is absolutely true and should affect the way you think and live."

- To the religious leaders Jesus had said, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you." (Matt.21:31)
- Speaking of the soon-coming destruction of temple, Jesus had said, "Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down. (Matt 24:2)
- To the rich young ruler, Jesus had said, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Matt.19:23-24)
- And now here, to Peter, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." (Matt.26:34)

Jesus is saying, that although Peter is certain of his spiritual strength and commitment, Jesus, the omniscient One, is much more certain of his fall.

### Application

No matter how confident we are in our spiritual strength or our own commitment to Jesus, listen to His words. When we trust in ourselves and in our own strength, we are certain to stumble; we are certain to fall. There is no "maybe" or "possibility" about it—it is certain.

Why? Because our flesh is weak (Matt.26:41); because our enemy, Satan, is cunning (2 Cor.11:3); because the world is a basket of temptations (1 John 3:16). Put those three things together and we don't stand a chance on our own. Apart from Him, we will fall flat every time.

Think about it. Our enemy knows that our flesh is weak and he wants us to fall. So, he has specifically designed this world system to appeal to our weak flesh,

- To lure us in with things we want to do—the lust of the flesh
- To lure us in with things we want to have—the lust of the eyes
- To lure us in with things we want to be—the boastful pride of life

We are like Pinocchio being lured in by the fox, John Worthington Foulfellow, to go live in Pleasure Island. And when we trust in our own wisdom and strength, we'll end up following him to our own fall.

Therefore, don't do it. Watch out for self-confidence. Beware of spiritual pride.

- **Proverbs 16:18**—Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.

## 2. The immediacy of his fall

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.

Jesus tells Peter that, despite his unshakable confidence in himself, his fall is coming soon, very soon. It's one thing for Jesus to say that Peter's loyalty would fail—for Peter that was unthinkable enough. It's another thing for Jesus to say that Peter is going to fail Him in just a few short hours.

"This very night? Before the rooster crows to signal the morning? Jesus, you have to give me a little more credit than that. After all we've been through? After all I've done for you to prove myself?"

### Application

We may admit that we will fall—we will give in to temptation and sin—sometime in the future. But we don't generally expect it's going to happen anytime soon. We don't realize how quickly the enemy can strike, or how quickly our flesh can take over when a trial or temptation comes.

Often, this happens in the wake of a spiritual high. We might be moved and inspired by a sermon, ready to go out and give our all for Jesus, intending to be more loyal to Christ. And all of the sudden we are blindsided—a trial in the home, a conflict with someone at work or even in the church—and before we know it, we are asking ourselves how we could let ourselves react that way, or fall back into that sin, or back off on our commitment to Jesus.

We might go on a mission trip and come back with a zeal for ministry and evangelism, feeling spiritually stronger than we have ever felt before, and having every intention of running hard for Christ. And almost as soon as we step off the airplane, we are ambushed by a trial or temptation and suddenly that renewed zeal for Christ goes by the wayside.

What happened? We became confident in ourselves and forgot to be confident in Christ. We trusted in our own strength, rather than trusting in Christ. We forgot about the weakness of our flesh and how easily we can be lured away from Christ.

### 3. The severity of his fall

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

What does Jesus mean when he tells Peter, "You will deny me"? The word "deny" (ἀπαρνέομαι) is a strong word that means "to repudiate, to disown". It is the same word that Jesus uses in Matthew 16:24 when He says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

When Jesus uses it here, He is telling Peter that this very night, you will disown Me; you will disassociate yourself from Me; you will deny that you have anything to do with Me. And not just once—being caught off guard and having a moment of anxiety—but three times you will deny Me; three times you will disown Me.

In other words, Peter's fall will be severe. All the other disciples will be scattered and abandon the Lord, but Peter, the leader among the disciples, will publicly disown Him, and then he will do it again, and then he will do it again. The one who was perhaps outwardly the strongest in faith will fall the hardest and furthest.

And we have all seen this in our day. And not just among the television evangelists, but among seemingly solid, godly, strong spiritual leaders. We were confident in them and they were confident in themselves, and that self-confidence led to spiritual unpreparedness. When temptation came, they were no match for it, they gave in to sin, fell from their place of leadership and influence, and left ruin in their wake.

But you may say, "Yes, they fell into sin, but they didn't publicly deny Jesus." But what we have to understand is that denying Christ is not just a matter of words.

- **Titus 1:15-16**—To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. <sup>16</sup> They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.

We can disassociate ourselves from Christ by our actions—by how we live our lives. By our words and our actions we can deny Christ. And we can also deny Him by our lack of word or action—by failing to say or do what we ought because of the fear of ridicule or because of our pride.

Many of us like to think we would never deny Jesus. Even if our lives were on the line, surely, we would hold fast to Him. But, how have you done when your reputation has been on the line? How many times have I been in a situation where I should have spoken up about Christ with my friends, but I kept silent because I was afraid what they might think of me? How many times have I minimized my love for Christ so that others wouldn't think I was a "Jesus freak"? How many times have I done something I know dishonors Christ just because others are doing it, and I don't want to be seen as different?

This has to be a warning, a wake-up call, to every one of us. We are all weak, in and of ourselves; and therefore, every one of us has the potential to deny Christ; to fall as immediately and severely as Peter.

I must, therefore:

**A. Beware of self-confidence, for I am not all that I think I am.**

**B. Believe Jesus' assessment of me, and not my own assessment of myself.**

And then what? How do I guard myself from self-confidence? What measures can I take to make sure I don't deny my Lord Jesus Christ?

**C. Be strong in the Lord, and not in yourself.**

1. Place no confidence in yourself.
2. Place all your confidence in God.

- **Proverbs 3:5**—Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.
- **Psalm 73:25-26**—Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
- **Philippians 3:3**—For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh
- **Ephesians 6:10**—Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

How? By putting on the full armor of God—the armor that He supplies.

**CONCLUSION:**

There is one more thing we need to talk about as we close this study. There may be some here today who recognize that they have denied the Lord Jesus Christ. Is there hope for you? Well, this issue of denying Jesus will come up again at the end of this chapter; and there will be more room to discuss this question more fully then. But, I need to tell you now that there is hope. And that hope is in Jesus, Himself.

- **Luke 22:31-32**—Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; <sup>32</sup> but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.

Our hope is in the love and faithfulness of Christ to His people. Christ intercedes for us, to keep us, so that no one is able to snatch His people out of His omnipotent hands.

Have you fallen? Have you lost the battle to temptation and sin? Have you denied Christ in words or deeds? Then repent and return to Him and trust in Him, for He is ready to forgive, to receive, and to restore.



Two stanzas from Patrick's Lorcia (Faeth Fiada), or Deer's Cry (a prayer or hymn attributed to St. Patrick in the 5<sup>th</sup> century):

*I arise today  
Through God's strength to pilot me:  
God's might to uphold me,  
God's wisdom to guide me  
God's eye to look before me,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak for me,  
God's hand to guard me,  
God's way to lie before me,  
God's shield to protect me  
God's host to secure me  
against snares of devils  
against temptations of vices  
against inclinations of nature  
against everyone who shall wish me ill,  
far and near,  
alone and in a crowd.*

*Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left  
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

Amen.

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