Section 4 - The Sifting
John 6:66-71
The sermon on the bread of life produced decisive results. It changed the popular enthusiasm the people had for Jesus into disgust. Like a fan, it separated the true disciples from the false. And like a winnowing breeze, it blew the chaff away, leaving a small residue of wheat behind. “As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore. (John 6:66).

This response did not take Jesus by surprise. He expected it. In a sense, He desired it, though He was deeply grieved by it. For while His large, loving, human heart longed for the salvation of all and desired that all should come and receive life, He wanted no one to come to Him by mistake or to follow Him for the wrong reasons. He sought disciples who were God-given (John 6:37), God-drawn (John 6:44), and God-taught (John 6:45), knowing that these alone would continue to follow His word (John 8:31). He was aware that of the large mass of people who had recently followed Him, there were many disciples who did not measure up to these standards. And He was willing that the mixed multitude be sifted. Therefore, He preached a message containing mysteries of the kingdom. It was intended to be a fragrance of life or death, depending on the spiritual condition of the hearer. Therefore, when the people were offended by the doctrine He taught, He plainly declared the true reason (John 6:36-37) and expressed His assurance that only those whom His Father taught and drew would or could really come to Him (John 6:44). He did not say these things to cause irritation but knew it was necessary to speak them, even though they would be disturbing. He acknowledged that true believers would take it all in stride, while those who took offense would reveal their true character.

The disciples who left Him, without a doubt, thought they were fully justified in withdrawing from Jesus’ company. They turned their backs on Him - we can only imagine - with a self-righteous indignation. They probably said in their hearts and to one another: “Who ever heard the likes of this? How absurd! How revolting! The man who speaks this way is either a fool, or he is trying to make fools of those who listen to him.” And yet the hardness of His teaching was not the real reason which led so many to forsake Him. It was simply the excuse. It was the most believable and respectable reason they could give for their conduct, which was really springing
up from other motives. The grand offense of Jesus was this: He was not the man they thought He was. He was not going to be their servant to promote the goals they had in mind. Whatever He meant by the bread of life or by eating His flesh, it was plain that He was not going to be a bread-king. He would not make it His business to furnish them with supplies for their physical appetites in order to usher in a golden age of idleness and plenty. Once they understood that, it was all over with Him as far as they were concerned. He could offer His heavenly food to whom-ever He pleased. They did not want any of it.

Jesus was deeply affected by the depressing sight of so many human beings deliberately preferring material things to eternal life. He turned to the Twelve and said, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” (John 6:67). The question can be understood as an implied expression of confidence in the people to whom it was addressed. It was also an appeal for them to show sympathy during a discouraging crisis. And yet, while a negative answer was expected to the question, it was not automatically anticipated. Jesus was even concerned about the faithfulness of the Twelve. He questioned them, conscious that they had been placed in trying circumstances, and that if they did not actually forsake Him now (as they did during the great and final crisis, i.e., His crucifixion), they were at least tempted to be offended by Him.

Without a doubt, a little reflection is all we need to show us that the Twelve were placed in a position at this time which was calculated to severely try their faith. For one thing, it is a simple fact that their Master was being deserted wholesale by the crowd of former admirers and followers. This created a temptation for these men to leave Jesus also. How mighty is the power of sympathy! How ready are we all to follow the crowd, regardless of the way they are going! How much moral courage it takes to stand alone! How difficult it is to witness the spectacle of thousands, or even hundreds, being disloyal to Jesus, without feeling an impulse to imitate their bad example! How hard to keep one’s self from being carried along with the powerful tide of negative popular opinion! It must have been especially hard for the Twelve to resist the tendency to leave Jesus if they sympathized with the attempt the multitude made to make Him king when their enthusiasm for Him was running high. They probably did. It would have gratified them to have seen their beloved Master made king by popular demand. How their spirits must have sunk when the bubble burst, and the would-be subjects of the Messianic Prince were dispersed like an idle mob. The kingdom which had seemed so near vanished like an imaginary dream!

Another circumstance that tried the faith of the Twelve was the strange, mysterious character of their Master’s message in the synagogue at Capernaum. That discourse contained hard, repulsive, unintelligible sayings, for them as well as for the rest of the audience. There is no doubt about this when we consider how repugnant they felt some time later when they received the news that Jesus was destined to be put to death (Matt. 16:22). If they objected even to the fact of
His death, how could they understand its meaning? Both fact and meaning were spoken about in such a veiled and mystical style. He had spoken the same way in the sermon on the bread of life. Therefore, while they believed that their Master had the words of eternal life and understood that this last message was related to this noble theme, it is almost certain that the Twelve did not understand the words which He spoke any more than the multitude did - no matter how much they tried. They did not comprehend the relationship that existed between Christ's flesh and eternal life, how eating His flesh could bestow any benefit. They did not even know what eating it might mean. They had lost sight of the Speaker because His thoughts were soaring like an eagle. They must have looked on in distress as the people melted away. They were painfully aware of the fact that they could not totally blame them.

Still, no matter how great the temptation to forsake their Master, the Twelve remained faithfully by His side. They came safely through the spiritual storm. What was the secret of their steadfastness? What were the anchors that preserved them from shipwreck? These questions have a practical value for all who, like the Apostles during this crisis, are tempted to abandon Christ because of a bad example or because of religious doubt; or, because of the nature of the world they live in, whether it is scientific or illiterate, refined or rustic; or, because of the deep things of God, whether these are the mysteries of providence, the mysteries of revelation, or the mysteries of religious experience. We may say these things to all Christians, for what Christian has not been tempted in one way or another at some time in his spiritual journey?

The answer to the question about their steadfastness is given to us in Simon Peter’s response to Jesus. As the spokesman for the whole group, he promptly said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

From these words, we infer that three anchors helped the Twelve ride out the storm: 1) religious earnestness or sincerity; 2) a clear perception of the alternatives before them; and 3) implicit confidence in the character and attachment to their Master.

**The First Anchor**

As a body, the Twelve were **sincere and thoroughly serious about religion**. Their supreme desire was to know “the words of eternal life” and actually to gain possession of that life. Their concern was not about food that perishes, but about the higher heavenly food of the soul which Christ had in vain exhorted the majority of His hearers to labor for. At this time, they did not clearly know the nature of this food. But according to the light they had, they sincerely prayed, “Lord, evermore give us this bread” (John 6:34). Therefore, it was not disappointing to them that Jesus declined to become a supplier of mere physical food. They had never expected or wished that He
do so. They had joined His company with entirely different expectations. A certain element of error might be mingled with truth in their conceptions about His mission, but the base, carnal hopes of the multitude had no place in their hearts. They did not become disciples to better their worldly circumstances. They became His disciples to obtain a portion which the world could neither give them nor take from them.

What we have just stated was true of all the Twelve except one. The crisis we are currently considering is memorable for several reasons, but especially because it was the first time that Jesus gave a hint that there was a false disciple among the men He had chosen. He defended Himself for asking a question which seemed to express His doubt about their faithfulness by replying to Peter’s protest: “Did I Myself not choose you, the Twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70). It was as if He were saying, “It is painful for Me to be suspicious, but I have a good reason: There is one among you who has had thoughts of desertion, and who is even capable of treachery.”

What sadness there must have been in His spirit to have suggested this thought during such a crisis! It would have been a small thing to be forsaken by the fickle crowd comprised of followers who were shallow and thoughtless, if He could have considered all of the Twelve as good men and true friends. But to have an enemy in one’s own house, a diabolus (devil) capable of playing Satan’s part in one’s small circle of intimate companions - it was extremely hard!

But how could a man destined to be a traitor and deserving to be stigmatized as a devil, manage to pass through the current crisis with any credibility? Don’t the facts seem to indicate that it is possible to be steadfast without being single-minded? Not at all. The only legitimate inference that can be made is that the crisis was not deep enough to bring out the true character of Judas. Wait until you see the end. A little religion will carry a man through many trials, but there is an experimentum crucis (the trial or experiment of the cross - an experiment of a most searching nature) which nothing but sincerity can tolerate. If a person is double-minded, or his heart is divided, the time comes when he is compelled to act according to his deepest and strongest motives. This remark applies especially to creative, revolutionary, or transitional periods of time. In quiet times, a hypocrite may pass though this world being respected. He may never be detected until he gets to the next, where his sins will follow him to judgment. But in critical periods in history, the sins of those who are double-minded are found out in this life. Even then, it is true that some double-minded people can stand more temptation than others and cannot be bought very cheaply. But all of them have their price. Those who fall less easily than others, in the end, fall deeper and more tragically.

We will have an opportunity to speak about the character and fall of Judas at another time. Our present goal is simply to point out that Jesus did not expect Judas to be faithful. By referring to him as He did, He made His conviction clear: The love of God and truth had to be the deepest
principle of a person’s being, or else he would not continue to be faithful until the end. In effect, He taught that if a person wanted to remain steadfast in the faith, it would be necessary for him to have moral integrity and godly sincerity.

**The Second Anchor**

The second anchor by which the disciples were kept from shipwreck during this period was *a clear perception of the alternatives before them.* “To whom shall we go?” asked Peter. He could see that the people, who had the same goals that he and his companions had, had no alternative but to remain where they were. He had searched his mind rapidly for alternatives, and this was his conclusion: “To whom shall we go - those of us who seek eternal life? John, our former master, is dead. And even if he were alive, he would send us back to You. Should we go to the scribes and Pharisees? We have been with You too long to do that. For You have taught us that their religious system is essentially ungodly, superficial, hypocritical, and showy. Or, should we follow the fickle multitude there, and relapse into stupidity and indifference? It cannot even be considered. Or, finally, should we go to the Sadducees, the idolaters of the material and temporal world, who say there is no resurrection, no angels or spirits? God forbid! That would mean we would have to renounce a hope that is dearer to us than life. Without that hope, life for our sincere minds would have become a riddle, a contradiction, and an intolerable burden.”

We can understand how helpful this clear perception of the alternatives was to Peter and his brothers by reflecting on the help we ourselves might derive from the same source when we are tempted by dogmatic difficulties to renounce Christianity. It would make anyone pause if he understood that the alternatives open to him were: 1) to abide with Christ, or 2) to become an atheist, ignoring God and the world to come. When he leaves Christ, he must go to school to study the great masters of total unbelief. In J.F. Richter’s works, there is a reference to a dream. It portrays with appalling vividness the consequences that would happen throughout the universe if the Creator ceased to exist. The gifted writer tells us that the dream was invented for the purpose of frightening those who discussed the being of God as coolly as if the question was on equal footing with the question of the existence of Kraken (a legendary sea monster of northern seas) or the unicorn. He also wanted to hold in check all atheistic thoughts which might come into his own heart. He said, “If ever my heart should be so unhappy and deadened as to have all those feelings which affirm the being of a God destroyed, I would use this dream to frighten myself, and so heal my heart, and restore its lost feelings.” Richter expected this benefit from reviewing his own dream. But anyone tempted to renounce Christianity would gain a clear sense that if he ceased being a Christian, he must make up his mind to accept a creed which acknowledges no God, no soul, and no hereafter.
Unfortunately, it is not as easy for us as it was for Peter to see clearly what the alternatives are before us. There are very few men like the late Dr. Strauss who are so clear-sighted, so logical, or so frank. In his publication, *The Old and the New Flesh*, he plainly states that he is no longer a Christian. Hence, there are many in our day who call themselves Christians, but whose theory of the universe (or, Weltanschauung, as the Germans call it) does not allow them to believe in the miraculous in any shape or in any sphere. These people have an axiom that the continuity of nature’s course cannot be broken. Therefore, they cannot even go to the degree the Socinians do in their view of Christ, who, at least, declare Him to be, without qualification, the Holy One of God, the morally sinless One. Even men like Renan claim to be Christians, and, like Balaam, bless Him while their philosophy compels them to blame Him. Our modern Balaams all confess that Jesus is, at least, the holiest of men, if not the absolutely Holy One. They are constrained to bless the Man of Nazareth. They are spell-bound by the star of Bethlehem, just as the Eastern soothsayer was by the Star of Jacob. They are forced to say in effect: “How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?....I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot change it” (Numbers 23:8,20). Others, who do not go as far as Renan and who do not entirely embrace naturalism, believe in a perfect Christ and consider Him to be a moral miracle. Yet they desire a Christianity that is independent of God’s law and one that has very little to do with miracles. They profess a Christianity that is purely ethical and which has to do primarily with admiring Christ’s character and moral teaching. As professors of this kind of Christianity, they regard themselves as exemplary disciples of Christ. The author of *Supernatural Religion* speaks about these men as people who are characterized by “a tendency to eliminate from Christianity, with thoughtless dexterity, every supernatural element which does not quite accord with current opinions.” He goes on to say of them, that they endeavor “to arrest for a moment the pursuing wolves of doubt and unbelief by practically throwing to them scrap by scrap the very doctrines which constitute the claims of Christianity to be regarded as a divine revelation at all.” It can hardly be said of these people that they have a consistent theory of the universe, for they hold opinions based on incompatible theories. Their tendency is to be naturalistic, yet they will not carry out naturalism to its logical conclusions. They are either not able, or they are unwilling, to realize the alternatives and to obey the voice of logic, which like a stern policeman tells them to “move on.” They would rather hold views which unite the alternatives in one particular creed, like Schleiermacher. Strauss considers him an excellent example of a class of people who have ground down Christianity and Pantheism to powder, and mixed them together so that it is hard to say where Pantheism ends and Christianity begins. The spirit of compromise is so widespread. It is recommended by many people who have ability and influence. So it requires some courage to have and hold a definite position, or to resist the temptation to yield to their positions. There is also the temptation to adopt the slogan: *Christianity without God’s law and miracle*. Perhaps it will be easier in time to realize the alternatives, when time has more clearly shown where the present tendencies lead.
Meanwhile, it is the evening twilight, and for the moment, it seems as if we could do without the sun. For though He is below the horizon, the air is still full of light. But wait awhile. The deepening of the twilight into the darkness of night will show how far Christ the Holy One of the Church's confession can be dispensed with as the Sun of the spiritual world.

**The Third Anchor**

The third anchor by which the Twelve were enabled to ride out the storm, was *confidence in the character of their Master*. They believed - they knew - that He was the Holy One of God. They had been with Jesus long enough to have come to very firm conclusions about Him. They had seen Him work many miracles. They had heard Him speak with wonderful wisdom, using parables and sermons on the divine kingdom. They had observed His wonderfully tender, gracious concern for those who were humble and those who were lost. They had been present during His various encounters with the Pharisees and had noted His holy abhorrence of their falsehood, pride, vanity, and tyranny. All of this blessed fellowship with Him had produced a confidence in, and a reverence for, their beloved Master. It was too strong to be shaken by a single message that contained some statements that were not understandable to them - not even if the message was couched in questionable or even offensive language. Their intellects might be perplexed, but their hearts remained true. So, while the others who did not know Jesus very well left in disgust, the Twelve continued by His side. They felt that this sort of Friend and Guide was not to be abandoned over something insignificant.

“We have believed and have come to know,” said Peter. He believed because he knew. This implicit confidence that the Twelve had in Jesus is possible only through intimate knowledge. For no one can trust a stranger this way. Everyone, therefore, who desires to have the benefit of this trust must be willing to spend time and take the trouble to get into the heart of the Gospel story and of its great Subject. One cannot have an anchor that really holds by simply reading the Gospel narratives in an apathetic, random way. He must pursue a close, careful, prayerful study of the texts year after year. Those who will not take the trouble are in immediate danger of the same fate that fell on the ignorant multitude. They are liable to be thrown into panic by every new book published by an unbeliever or to be upset by every strange word that the Object of faith (Jesus) speaks. For those, on the other hand, who do take the trouble, they will be rewarded for their efforts. They may be tossed by the storm for a time, but they will eventually reach the harbor of a creed which is not a compromise between infidelity and scriptural Christianity, but embraces all the cardinal facts and truths of the faith as taught by Jesus in the discourse at Capernaum. Later, these same truths were taught by the men who passed safely through the Capernaum crisis.

May God in His mercy guide all souls, who are now out in the tempestuous sea of doubt, into that haven of rest!