Section 1 - “All The Disciples Left Him and Fled.”
*Matthew 26:36-41,55,56,69-75; John 18:15-18*

From the room where they had eaten supper (where we have spent so much time), we go into the world outside to witness the behavior of the Eleven in the great and final crisis. The passages we are looking at describe the part they played in the solemn events that are associated with their Master’s end. Sadly, that part was an unheroic one. Their faith, love, and principles all gave way before the instincts of fear, shame, and self-preservation. The best of the disciples, the three who were the most reliable and selected by Jesus to keep Him company in the garden of Gethsemane, totally failed to provide the service that was expected of them. While their Lord was experiencing His agony, they fell asleep, just as they had done before on the Mount of Transfiguration. So even the hand-picked men proved that they were only raw recruits, unable to shake off the drowsiness while they were on duty as lookouts. “What! You men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?” Then, when the enemy appeared, both these three and the other eight ran away panic-stricken. “All the disciples left Him and fled” (Mt. 26:56b). One of them who thought He was bolder than his brothers not only left Him, but denied His beloved Master, declaring with an oath, “I do not know the man!” (Mt. 26:74).

The conduct of the disciples at this crisis in their history was very weak and unmanly. Naturally, two questions arise: 1) “How should they have acted? and 2) Why did they act as they did (i.e., what were the causes of their failure?).

**How Should They Have Acted?**

Consider the first question. When we try to formulate a distinctive course of action that was demanded by faithfulness, it is not readily apparent at what point the disciples were at fault (of course, Peter is the exception). What could they do when their Lord was arrested but run away? Offer resistance? Jesus had positively forbidden that immediately before they seized Him. When the band of armed men appeared, “and when those who were around Him saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, shall we strike with the sword?’” (Lk. 22:49). Without waiting for a reply, one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. John tells us that the fighting disciple was Simon Peter. He had brought a sword with him from the room where they had supper to Gethsemane (there was a second sword there also; see Lk. 22:38). Peter was thinking it might be needed and fully intended to use it if necessary. Though later he proved himself to be a coward among the servants and maids, he was no such coward in the garden. He used his weapon boldly, perhaps even skillfully, and did some damage, though thankfully none...
that was deadly. When it happened, Jesus intervened to prevent further bloodshed, speaking words that, as recorded, clearly established a policy of non-resistance. “Put your sword back into its place,” He said to Peter. Then He added this reason: “for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (Mt. 26:52). It was as if He was saying, “In this kind of warfare, we are going to receive the worst of it.” Then He hinted at more noble reasons for non-resistance than mere considerations of prudence or expediency. “Do you think,” He asked the warlike disciple, “that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?” (Mt. 26:53-54). He could confront human force by a superior, divine, celestial force if He chose to. But He did not choose this way, for to overpower His enemies would be to defeat His own purpose in coming to the world. And that purpose was to conquer, not by physical force, but by truth and love and godlike patience - by drinking the cup which His Father had put into His hands, even though it was bitter to His flesh and blood (cf. Jn. 18:11).

These words spoken in Gethsemane harmonize with the statements Jesus made on the same subject when He left the room where they had eaten together (Lk. 22:35-38). In Luke’s letter, these statements seem to point to a policy that is the very opposite of non-resistance. Jesus seems to say that the great work and duty of the hour, for all who are on His side, is to obtain swords for themselves. The need is so urgent that whoever wants a weapon must sell his clothes to buy one. But the very emphasis with which He speaks demonstrates that His words are not to be taken literally. It is very easy to see what He means. He uses graphic language to let His disciples know that the situation is serious. “Now,” He would say, “now is the day. In fact, the battle is happening right now. If My kingdom is of this world, as you have thought, now is the time for fighting - not dreaming. Now the situation has come to a head, and you need to have all of your resources. Equip yourselves with shoes, purse, and knapsack. Above all, make sure you have your swords and warlike courage.”

The disciples did not understand their Lord’s meaning. They gave a stupid, ordinary interpretation to this part of His farewell discourse (like they had done with so many other parts). So, with ridiculous seriousness, they said, “Lord, look, here are two swords” (Lk. 22:38). The foolish remark provoked a response which should have opened their eyes and kept Peter from carrying the matter so far that he actually took one of the swords with him. “It is enough,” Jesus said, probably with a sad smile on His face as He thought about the ridiculous simplicity of those dear childish and childlike men: “It is enough” (Lk. 22:38). Two swords. Actually they are enough, but only for the one who does not intend to fight at all. What were two swords for twelve men against a hundred offensive weapons? The very thought of fighting in those circumstances was absurd. It only had to be broadly stated in order to appear to be an absurdity.
So, the disciples were not called on to fight for their Master to keep Him from being delivered over to the Jews. What else, then, should they have done? Was it their responsibility to suffer with Him and to go with Him to prison and death? This would have certainly carried out the intentions that Peter had mentioned. But this was not required of them either. When Jesus surrendered Himself into the hands of His captors, He suggested that they should let His followers go on their way and only take Him into custody (Jn. 18:8). He did not do this simply out of compassion for them. As the Captain of salvation, He was making the best arrangements for Himself and for the interests of His kingdom. For it was just as necessary for the disciples to live as for Him to die. He gave Himself up to death in order that there might be a gospel to preach. He was concerned about the safety of His disciples in order that there might be men to preach it. It is readily apparent, then, that it was not the disciples' responsibility to expose themselves to danger. Their duty lay, instead, in taking care of their lives in order to be used in the future.

If the disciples, then, did not fail in fighting for or suffering with their Lord, where were the Eleven at fault? The answer lies in their lack of faith. “Believe in God, and believe in Me,” Jesus had said to them at the beginning of His farewell address. And at this critical hour, they did neither. They did not believe that everything would end well for themselves nor for their Master. Nor did they believe that God would provide for their safety without any sacrifice of principle, or even dignity, on their part. The only confidence they had was in the swiftness of their feet. If they had possessed faith in God and in Jesus, they would have witnessed their Lord's arrest without being discouraged, for they would have been assured of both His return and of their own safety. Some would have followed the officers of justice to see what happened. The others, squeamish about disturbing and painful situations, would have retired quietly to their homes until the tragedy was over. But they lacked faith. They neither calmly followed nor calmly retired. Rather, faithlessly and shamefully, they forsook their Lord and fled. The sin was not in the outward act so much as in their inward state of mind. They fled in unbelief and despair as men whose hope was shattered. They fled from a Man whose cause was lost and whom God had abandoned to His enemies.

Why Did The Disciples Act As They Did?

We have determined the point at which the disciples were at fault. Now we have to look into the causes of their wrong behavior. At the very outset, we remember that Jesus anticipated the failure of His followers. He did not count on their being faithful; He expected them to desert Him. When Peter offered to follow Him wherever He might go, Jesus told him that before the cock crowed the next morning he would deny Him three times. At the close of the farewell address, He told all of the disciples that they would abandon Him. On the way to the Mount of Olives, He repeated the statement in this way: “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’” (Mt. 26:31).
On all these occasions, the tone He used was more prophetic than reproachful. He expected His disciples to be panic-stricken, just as anyone would expect sheep to flee when a wolf appeared. Jesus was lenient with them and, from His attitude, we should infer that the sin of the disciples was one of weakness. This is something we can be sure of. We know it is true because of the words He used to address the three drowsy disciples in Gethsemane. “Keep watching and praying,” He said to them, “that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41). The kind judgment Jesus expressed was pronounced especially for the failure of Peter, James, and John in the garden. But it clearly applies to the behavior of all the disciples (even Peter’s denial) throughout the terrible crisis. Jesus regarded the Eleven as men who were totally committed to Him but who were likely to fall, because of the weakness of their flesh, when they were exposed to sudden temptation.

But what do we mean by the weakness of the flesh? Instinctively loving life, dreading danger, fearing man? No. These instincts were a part of the Apostles throughout their lives. But they did not ever lead (except in one situation) to misconduct again. What was weak? Not only the flesh, but also the willing spirit. Their spiritual character at this time was deficient in certain areas which typically give steadiness to the good impulses of the heart and mastery over the weaknesses of human nature. The missing elements of strength were: forethought, clear perceptions of truth, self-knowledge, and the discipline of experience.

Because they lacked forethought, it so happened that the seizure of their Lord took the Eleven by surprise. This may seem hard to believe since Christ had given them so many hints about His approaching death after the institution of the Supper, the farewell address, the reference to the traitor, the prophetic announcement about their own frailty, and the discourse about the sword, which was like a trumpet calling all to battle. Yet there can be no doubt that this was a fact. The Eleven went out to Gethsemane without any definite idea about what was coming. These raw recruits actually did not know that they were on a march to the battlefield. The three disciples asleep in the garden is sufficient proof of this. Had the three “guards” been thoroughly impressed with the belief that the enemy was nearby, they would not have fallen asleep, even though they were tired and sad. Fear would have kept them awake. But understand this: “If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into” (Mt. 24:43).

The failure of the disciples at the final crisis was also due in part to the lack of clear perceptions of truth. They did not understand the doctrine about Christ. They believed their Master was the Christ, the Son of the living God. But their faith was wrapped around a false theory of Messiah’s mission and career. In their theory, the cross had no place. As long as the cross was only talked about, their theory remained firmly rooted in their minds. The words of their Master were quickly forgotten. But when the cross finally came, when the things which Jesus foretold began
to be fulfilled, their theory went down like a tree suddenly smitten by a whirlwind, carrying the
ivy of their faith with it. From the moment Jesus was seized, all that remained of their faith was
simply a regret that they had been mistaken: “We were hoping that it was He who was going to
redeem Israel” (Lk. 24:21a). How could anyone act heroically in these circumstances?

A third radical defect in the character of the disciples was ignorance. The person who knows
his weaknesses may become strong even at the weak points. But the one who does not know his
weaknesses finds it difficult to be strong at any point. Now Jesus’ followers did not know their
weaknesses. They credited themselves with a faithfulness and courage that only existed in their
imaginations. Every one of them adopted Peter’s sentiment as their own: “Even if I must die
with You, I will not deny You” (Mt. 26:35). Surprise! They did not know how much fear of man
was in them, how much pitiful cowardice they had in the presence of danger. Of course, when
danger actually came, the usual consequence of self-conscious courage followed. All of these
bold-hearted disciples forsook their Master and fled.

The last, but not the least, cause of weakness in the disciples was their inexperience with situa-
tions like the ones they were having to go through now. Experience in war is one great cause for
the coolness and courage of veteran soldiers in the middle of danger. A practical acquaintance
with the dangers of military life makes them callous and fearless. But Christ’s disciples were not
yet veterans. They were only entering into their first engagement. Until now, they had experi-
enced only the kind of trials that fall on the rawest recruits. They had been asked to leave home,
friends, fishing boats, and everything on earth to follow Jesus. But these initial hardships do not
make a soldier - not this, nor the discipline demanded by the drill sergeant, nor putting on a
uniform. Behold the green, soft young man with his bright uniform when he is brought face to
face with the stark reality of battle. His knees knock, his heart grows sick, perhaps he even faints
and is carried to the rear, unable to take any part in the fight. Poor lad - pity him, do not scorn
him. He may turn out to be a brave soldier one day. The bravest of soldiers probably do not feel
very heroic the first time they are under fire.

These observations help us understand how it happened that the little flock was scattered when
Jesus their Shepherd was arrested. The explanation is really proof that the disciples were sheep,
not yet ready to shepherd people. This being the case, we are not surprised at the leniency of
Jesus which we have already mentioned. No one expects sheep to do anything other than flee
when the wolf comes. Cowardly fear is only severely detested in shepherds. Bearing this in mind,
we will more readily forgive Peter for denying his Lord in one unguarded moment (Mt. 26:69-
75) than for his cowardice at Antioch some years later. Then he gave the cold shoulder to his
Gentile brothers because he feared the Jewish people from Jerusalem (Gal. 2:11-12). Peter was a
shepherd then, and it was his responsibility to lead the sheep or even to carry them against their
wills into the wide green pastures of Christian liberty. Instead, he tamely followed those who
demonstrated that they were just lambs in Christ’s flock. His actual behavior was very blame-
worthy and very wrong. In reality, he was not leading; he was led. And as an Apostle, he enjoyed
the reputation and influence of a chief shepherd. Therefore, he had no option but either to lead
or mislead. He misled. Even Barnabas was influenced by his duplicity (Gal. 2:13). It is a serious
thing for the Church when those who are shepherds in office and influence are really sheep in
opinion and heart; leaders in name, led in fact.