

The Warrior Rejected by Many Followers

John 6:66-68 (Midweek Lent - March 18)

Every day, somewhere, couples get divorced. We remember all the happy moments of that wedding day when two people declared their love for each other and put rings on each other's fingers. They made so many promises: to take care of each other when they were sick, when poor, when things were bad, as well as when things were better. They said they would cherish each other right up until one of them died. So what happened to those happy days and that awesome commitment to each other? What does it take to break up a wedded couple? How many disagreements and arguments? How much disgust over such things as personal habits and other actions? What causes the "Wow" to turn to "Ugh"? As a pastor, I've seen enough of these problems to weep. It's always a loss and rejection when someone deserts the marriage. Jesus inspired excitement—the "Wow"—when he began his ministry. Yet the "Ugh" entered the hearts of some.

It was during his last year of ministry. For two years, crowds regularly followed him, eagerly watching and listening. Shortly after he had fed a college basketball arena-sized crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children, with five loaves of bread and two fish, the people began to think that they should make Jesus their king. They were even going to take him by force, probably so they could keep him there at the Sea of Galilee and get all that free food and maybe also be free of disease.

It's tragic that their expectations were for a Savior who would give them food and health. Some of their spiritual leaders had abandoned the beautiful promises of the Savior from sin and the giver of eternal life. They had turned those promises into a prediction of a king who would throw out the hated Roman rulers and establish a kingdom on earth with unlimited bread and health. How could that have happened? An enemy had been at work! Satan had convinced the spiritual leaders with a lie to reject Jesus. Many others chose to do the same.

Jesus resisted their efforts to make him a king and withdrew from them. The next day, the crowd found Jesus and had many questions. The subject turned, naturally, to bread. That's when Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

Whoa! They had bread on their mind, but the bread Jesus gave them was so different from what they expected. He told them he had come from his Father in heaven. He was the bread from heaven, and all who "ate" the bread from heaven, that is, who took him in by faith, would live forever. He would raise them up on the Last Day. But they seemed to stop listening. If you had been there, I think you would have felt the enthusiasm go out of the huge crowd, like when the visiting football team scores the winning field goal as the clock runs out. Many turned around and headed home.

But it wasn't just the crowd of thousands who walked away. Jesus had a group of disciples whom he was training to reach out with the gospel to the huge mission field in Galilee and beyond. But the words of Jesus, the bread from heaven, were difficult to understand. How could he claim to give them eternal life? "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" (John 6:60). And right after this we learn, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66).

It's hard to accept that some of his disciples would desert him. They were people who had walked all those miles with Jesus, had slept on the ground many nights, had eaten with him, had seen his many miracles.

Jesus is the most fascinating person who has ever walked on the face of the earth. When he spoke, it was with a kind of authority that no one had ever heard before!

This was the Savior of the world who had come to offer his perfect life in exchange for our sin at the battle on Calvary. He's getting ready for that battle and has been preparing the troops to carry on. And some of them leave. They did not believe Jesus had the authority or power to grant eternal life. They reject him. They divorce themselves from him. The "Wow" had turned to "Ugh." This is just sad, when his own reject him. The enemy of Jesus had gotten to the hearts and minds of the Jewish leaders and others. He had led them to believe the lie that Jesus couldn't be who he had said and showed he was. The leaders were teaching false doctrine of the worst kind to their people: that they could somehow get to heaven by trying to be good people and following the law. Jesus was simply telling them what he had said at the beginning of his ministry to Nicodemus: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). We begin to see the huge forces Jesus was fighting against.

It wasn't just back then. The enemy still hates Jesus and, as much as he can, still fights hard against him. The enemy has encouraged lost people to grow deeper in their separation from God by establishing numerous false religions all of them offering some sort of path to God or a substitute for God, a path that leads only to hell.

He has also made inroads into the Christian church, spreading false doctrine, attacking the Bible, and using critics of Christianity in the media, in universities, and in politics to damage and destroy saving faith. You know about the growing numbers of "dones"—people who have left the church and say they won't come back. And the "nones"—people who claim they have no religious affiliation. Satan is a terrorist who is cornered and knows he's going to die—but he wants to take as many as he possibly can with him.

Maybe you have someone close who is slipping or has lost his or her faith due to the coronavirus. We all sometimes struggle with a personal doubt about something God says. Our doubts and questions keep buzzing in our brain. So you can understand Jesus when he turns to the smaller group of disciples with a question. Listen carefully to this question: (Read it slowly.)

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve" (John 6:67).

Jesus gives them the opportunity to make a clear answer. Was there emotion in his voice? Did they hesitate? Did they want time to see how many others were staying first, before they gave their own answer? We don't know, but this we do know:

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). I love Peter here because he is so right on: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

When God created the world, he simply spoke, "Let there be . . .," and there was light and dirt and stars and galaxies and lions and butterflies—a universe beyond understanding. He just spoke! What power God has in his words!

I'm holding in my hands (lifting the Bible or tablet) God's own love story toward us—his words of life, forgiveness, and salvation. These words have terrific power. You know the passage in Romans where Paul tells us, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Only God knows how many believing Christians there are in the world. This I do know: Every single one of them did absolutely nothing to create saving faith in their hearts. Everyone—you and I too—came by only one very powerful means, one agency, one path. It doesn't matter if it is spoken, read, or received in a tactile, visible fashion called Baptism. It's the single most powerful force for good in our world: GOD'S WORD! That's what brought you and me to trust that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has purchased and won for us the forgiveness of all our sins! He did it all and paid it all for us! He loves us enough to die so we might live with him forever. So can you see why Jesus fought false teachers so hard?

He said, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15). They continue to oppose Jesus and lure you to abandon your Savior. They have a lot of opinions and theories, but they do not have the words of eternal life. There is only one source for that, and Peter had it right: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Peter and the others were blessed and did not want to lose what Jesus had given them. We are also blessed. You and I are washed in the blood of the Lamb of God! We are forgiven and we have eternal life.

Jesus becomes our guest preacher here every time we come to listen. He promises to take us through the door marked "Death." He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It was Martin Luther who said, "If you were to ask a Christian what his task is and by what he is worthy of the name of Christian, there could be no other response than hearing the Word of God, that is, faith. Ears are the only organs of the Christian." (Repeat the last sentence.)

We are a few weeks away from Easter, but with all that is happening it doesn't feel like it. Let this Lent be time for us to grow more deeply in the Word—our own spiritual spring training. My prayer is that by Easter we will be renewed in our zeal to make better use of the Word. Start your own personal reading program or home devotions. I suggest each of us start tonight or tomorrow by reading chapter 12 of John's gospel, and then a chapter each day to the end of John's gospel. It is the story of our Savior's last week on earth, and it's riveting reading.

We are challenged every day to hold on tightly to God's Word when we see and hear all the stuff the world, our sinful flesh, and Satan throws at us. It's a pretty steady flood. So if Jesus were to ask us right now, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" will you join in answering, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" Amen.