

Discipleship Under Pressure



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Kings 18, Matt. 26:56, Luke 9:51–56, John 6:1–15, 12:1–6, 18:1–11, 21:15–19.*

Memory Text: “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the flooding of the Jordan?” (*Jeremiah 12:5, NKJV*).

Ever hear of Murphy’s law? It is considered by some to be one of the fundamental laws of nature, as pervasive as gravity and electromagnetism. Stated briefly, it reads, “Whatever can go wrong will go wrong.”

We have all had moments, even days (or longer), that seem to follow Murphy’s law. Sometimes our experiences as disciples seem to follow it, as well. No doubt, we have the promises of God that should help us not to get discouraged, but how easy it is sometimes, even with the promises, to be tempted to give up in despair. Of course, no matter what, we never should.

This week we will look at some disciples and see what we can learn from their bad days.

The Week at a Glance: What warning should we take away from the disciples’ bid for political power? What lessons does Judas have for us? What was behind James’s and John’s willingness to destroy those who rejected Jesus? What can we take away from Peter’s rashness and repentance? Why, after having seen so much, did all the disciples forsake Jesus in the hour of His great need?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 8.

The Power Model

Religious faith can be a very powerful tool, either for good or for evil. The same kind of drive that motivates someone to “lose his life” (*Matt. 16:25*) for Christ’s sake can, in other circumstances, drive others to blow themselves up in the name of God. After all, if you believe that God is calling you to do something, who is going to let any kind of earthly or worldly considerations stand in your way? That is why, for instance, some governments seek to quell religion among the people, because they do not want people having allegiance to a higher authority, and you cannot get any higher than the Divine. On the other hand, governments are not immune from seeking to co-opt the incredible power of religion and using it to their own advantage. The disciple of Christ has to be aware of the various dangers involved with abusing the power of religion.

Read John 6:1–15. What lesson can we learn from this about how the disciple of Christ should view political power?

Though, of course, Jesus’ purpose on earth was not to become an earthly king, it is clear that garnering earthly political power should not be equated with doing the work of discipleship. That God can put people in power, or that He can use people in power, is one thing; it is another to somehow view the amassing of political power in the name of God as the work of God, the work of discipleship. Nothing in the New Testament presents this *power model* of the gospel. Unfortunately, even His closest disciples missed this important point: “The disciples unite with the multitude in declaring the throne of David the rightful inheritance of their Master. It is the modesty of Christ, they say, that causes Him to refuse such honor. . . . They eagerly arrange to carry out their purpose.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 378. Building on the eager expectation and enthusiasm of the multitude, they forcefully attempted to take Jesus and make Him King over the nation (*John 6:14, 15*). This was discipleship their way. In reaction to this move, Jesus dismissed the multitude, sent the disciples to cross the lake, and went into the mountains alone to pray.

What are ways, even on a more personal level, that we can abuse religion and co-opt it for our own selfish ends?

The Greed Model

Someone once said, “If you want to get rich, start a religion.” How unfortunate, but there is a lot of truth to that cynical statement. After all, when dealing with religious faith, we are dealing with some of the most important aspects of human existence. We are dealing with the meaning of life, with the hope of eternity, with the belief that we are forgiven by God for our sins. However much Jesus Himself, by model and example, lived a life of self-denial and poverty, however much He warned us against getting caught up in the things of this world, church history is replete with examples of those who have used the power of religion and religious ideas to gain wealth for themselves, often at the expense of the poor.

Read John 12:1–6 and then answer the following questions:

1. What symbolism is found in the act of Mary? In other words, in what ways does it represent the attitudes of the true disciples of Christ? *See also Matt. 13:46, Phil. 3:8.*
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2. What does this story tell us about the importance of the motives of our actions?
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3. The texts say that Lazarus, the resurrected Lazarus, was at the table with them. Why does that fact make Judas’s actions even more repugnant, more indicative of how blinded he was by his own sin?
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It is with good reason that Paul made the famous statement he did in 1 Timothy 6:10. Judas eventually lost his soul over his love of money. From the start, it seems, he was looking out only for number one; he himself, and the desire to gain things for himself, was woven all through his own discipleship. Of course, the other disciples were not totally selfless either, but with Judas it got the best of him.

How can you be sure that greedy motives are not poisoning your role as a disciple of Christ? More so, if you detect some impure motives, how can you be purged of them?

The Thunder Model

There were at least two pairs of brothers among Jesus' twelve disciples. At their call, Jesus surnamed the pair of James and John *boanerges*, or "sons of thunder" (*Mark 3:17*). Some commentators believe that Jesus gave them this name because of their vehement temperaments and fiery tempers. Therefore, we have chosen to call their approach to discipleship the thunder model.

Read Luke 9:51–56. Look at the reaction of the disciples to the rejection of Jesus. As you read this, try to put yourself in the place of these disciples. What reasons would they have for reacting as they did? In other words, what things did they hear Jesus say, or what other Old Testament examples might they have drawn from, that could have caused them to react as they did? See, for example, *Genesis 6, 7, Matt. 8:12, 13:42, Mark 6:11*.

A number of problems exist with the reaction of the disciples. There is zeal for the Lord, which is good, which all disciples should have. But misdirected zeal, even in a good cause, can produce more harm than good. For instance, James and John used the story of Elijah as their model. The only problem is that they misused it. Elijah brought fire down from heaven to consume sacrifices (*1 Kings 18*), not recalcitrant people (he had them slain another way).

Even worse, of course, was their harsh and judgmental attitude toward sinners. The work of every disciple of Christ should be that of seeking ways to bring sinners to the foot of the Cross, to show them the incredible mercy and grace of God, who in Himself bore the punishment of their sins. Thus, no matter how sinful their lives have been, through Jesus they can have full pardon, full forgiveness, and a new life in Him. That is our work as disciples; we can leave the judging to the Lord.

How judgmental are you toward those whom you deem wayward and wrong? How do we show these people the grace and mercy of God, while at the same time not giving the impression that we condone or approve of their lives and/or beliefs?

The Repentant-Peter Model

Peter is known as that impetuous disciple who always had something to say on everything. Luke 22:33, 34 says he was so sure of himself and his discipleship that he promised to go with Jesus even to prison and death. Of course, not long after, he had to retract those words (*Matt. 26:69–75*).

Read John 18:1–11. What does this tell us about the personality and character of Peter, especially in light of Matthew 26:69–75?

We all know about Peter's failure. It exists as a powerful lesson to all disciples of Christ. We cannot work for the Lord in our own power. How crucial it is that we day by day surrender ourselves to Jesus. He is the Vine, we are the branches; without Him we can do nothing, especially not be faithful disciples. Again, zeal for the Lord and His cause is wonderful, but it must be done under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Read John 21:15–19. What does this teach us about what Jesus can do for those of His disciples who, repenting of their mistakes, do not give up on Christ?

"Here is given a lesson for all Christ's followers. The gospel makes no compromise with evil. It cannot excuse sin. Secret sins are to be confessed in secret to God; but, for open sin, open confession is required. . . . By giving proof of repentance, the disciple, so far as lies in His power, is to remove this reproach. . . . Three times Peter had openly denied his Lord, and three times Jesus drew from him the assurance of his love and loyalty, pressing home that pointed question, like a barbed arrow to his wounded heart. Before the assembled disciples Jesus revealed the depth of Peter's repentance, and showed how thoroughly humbled was the once boasting disciple."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 811, 812.

Notice what Jesus said to Peter in John 21:18, 19. Jesus, basically, was telling Peter that in the end, Peter would end up dying for the Lord he so fervently loved. Peter's words, in the end, came true, but only after he had learned some hard lessons about discipleship.

Have you made boastful promises, only to fail time and again, from fulfilling them? What can you take away from the story of Peter that can help you not to give up?

The Flight Model

“Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled” (Matt. 26:56).

The disciples spent three and a half years with Jesus. They had privileges that very few in the world ever had. They saw things few humans ever did. After all, among the world’s billions, how many ever saw Jesus in the flesh? More so, how many ever interacted day after day with Him while He was here in the flesh? These disciples were among the most privileged humans ever to have lived.

Of course, that was part of the problem—they were humans, fallen humans, and thus, no matter what the Lord did for them, the lessons were not easily learned.

Skim through a Gospel, any Gospel. What were the amazing things that Jesus said and did in the sight of His disciples? How much incredible proof did He give them concerning who He was? After going over those incidents, look at the text for today. What fearful message, even warning, can we draw from this for ourselves?

Knowing He would be leaving them, Jesus prepared the disciples for His departure, but they did not listen. Knowing what would happen in Jerusalem, He prepared them for His passion, but they did not listen. They arrived in Jerusalem totally unprepared.

During Jesus’ ministry, the disciples seemed to look at what He did rather than to listen to what He said. His deeds confirmed their Messianic hopes, and that pleased them very much. At the Transfiguration the heavenly Voice called them to listen to Jesus, yet they did not benefit from His instructions about the Passion.

Following the Passover meal, Jesus tried to show His followers what lay ahead, but they would not listen. In the Garden, He tried to get them to pray to gain strength, but they slept.

Meditate on all that Jesus has done for you: the promises, the hope, the gifts given you, the changes made in your life, the evidences for your faith, all through Christ. How can we, by clinging to these things, avoid the mistakes of the disciples?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 208–211, 465, 466, 524–529, 595–597, 635, 636, 775, 776, 962, 963, 2020, 2021; Ellen G. White, “Give Ye Them to Eat,” pp. 364–380; “Who Is the Greatest?” pp. 437–438; “The Law of the New Kingdom,” pp. 547–551; “A Feast at Simon’s House,” pp. 559–565; “By the Sea Once More,” pp. 809–817, in *The Desire of Ages*; “John the Beloved,” pp. 539–543, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The love of money in the heart of Judas was growing with the exercise of his shrewd abilities. His practical financing ability, if exercised and enlightened and moulded by the Holy Spirit, would have been of great service to the little church, and by the sanctification of his spirit he would have had a clear insight, a correct discernment to appreciate heavenly things. But worldly policy plans were constantly cherished by Judas. There was no outbreaking sin on his part, but his sharp scheming, the selfish, parsimonious spirit that took possession of him, finally led him to sell his Lord for a small sum of money.”

—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1101.

“Judas was with Christ through the entire period of the Saviour’s public ministry. He had all that Christ could give him. . . . Had he sought to be a blessing, instead of a questioning, criticizing, selfish man, the Lord would have used him to advance His kingdom. But Judas was a speculator. He thought that he could manage the finances of the church, and by his sharpness in business get gain. He was divided in heart. He loved the praise of the world. He refused to give up the world for Christ. He never committed his eternal interests to Christ. . . . Judas was a religious fraud.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 1101, 1102.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ If disciples are followers, are those who follow their own ideas and programs still disciples? Dwell on that question and your answer.
- ❷ What other models of discipleship under pressure can you think of, and what lessons can we learn from them?
- ❸ While we can find in Peter someone who jumped ahead too fast, only to stumble and fall, what are the dangers of being too cautious? In what ways can we go too far the other way? Think about this and bring some thoughts to class. As you do, think about your local church as a whole. Is your church too ready to jump ahead of the Lord, or does it tend to be too timid to follow the leading of the Lord? What can you do, as a class, to help your church strike the right balance?

Death in the Night

by JAMES APPEL

A cool east wind chilled my tired body. Sarah and I prayed then crawled into bed to sleep. The chirping of thousands of African insects lulled me to sleep.

A soft tap, tapping on the door pulled me awake. "Doctor?" David's voice stirred my consciousness.

"Yes," I replied groggily.

"One of the patients has died. The family has arrived with their ox cart to take the body to their village for burial. But I can't open the combination lock on the gate."

I became aware of the wails and shrieks of mourning as I pulled aside the mosquito net and grabbed my flashlight.

"I'm coming," I mumbled as I searched for my clothes. I pushed open the metal door, slipped on my flip flops, and followed David toward the hospital.

"Aaaah! Ohhh, ohhh, ohhh! Aye yi yi yi yi yi!" The nightmarish sounds wafted across the campus as we approached the gate. I dialed the combination and tugged the lock open. David opened the gate, and two shadowy forms slipped silently past us. Outside a group of women, one with a baby strapped to her back, danced the dance of death, their arms flailing the air. Others sat in a tight bunch accompanying the dancers with chants, wails, and moans of death. A man beat his breast as an agonizing yell tore from his throat. Dogs barked at the nighttime disturbance.

Anger, pity, and sorrow welled up within me. These same people had let their relative lie sick for a week before bringing him to the hospital. They couldn't afford to pay \$20 for his treatment; yet now they will spend hundreds of dollars to feed relatives and friends who will come for his funeral. People will gather and "weep" to prove their sorrow and to be sure that his spirit doesn't come back to haunt them.

I am sick of the fear of death, the spirits, and the hauntings that these people endure. It breaks my heart to see the ignorance that holds them captive. I know the One who has promised to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (*Heb. 2:15*).

But fighting against so much superstition and fear and tradition seems so overwhelming.

The two men reappear pulling the ox cart past us. We replace the lock, then I walk back home as the sounds of the funeral procession fade into the dark African night.

"Lord Jesus," I pray, "what can I do to show them Your way? How can I teach them to trust You with their lives—and their death?"

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