

A Lonely Journey

Mark 14:27-52

Introduction - We Don't Do Lament

When I was in high school there was a simple song that became incredibly popular. I know my voice isn't in the same league as Alison's but if I give you the opening lines let's see if you know the title.

(whistling)

Here's a little song I wrote. You might want to sing it note for note ... Don't worry, be happy

“Don't worry, be happy.” That's not just the catch cry of the late 80s or America, we have our own version of it. Australians say, “She'll be ... [right mate]!” Also, the English have the slight less fun version, “Chin-up old chap.”

It isn't just at a national level though, in the church we're much more likely to sing, “I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart” than we are to sing a song which expresses deep sorrow or lament. Similarly, I was catching up with a friend at a training event recently and she told me about a funeral she had attended of a man. The wife of the man who had died was telling her twelve year old son, “Don't cry. Daddy's in heaven with Jesus.” When Christians say things like that we ignore the reality that grief is a completely natural and an appropriate response to the loss of a loved one, it's just that we're not to grieve in the same way as people who don't have hope.

At both a cultural level as well as at a church level we have a problem with accepting sadness and lament. I wonder if our refusal to accept these aspects of the human experience has been one of the factors in the rise of anxiety and mental health struggles. When we're told to avoid certain emotions they are likely to come out in different ways.

Today we're going to look at a time of intense sadness and loneliness for Jesus and what we can learn from this.

The Abandonment By Disciples (vv. 27-31; 43-51)

The first thing we notice in this section of Mark 14 is that this is another time when Mark interweaves one story between another story. We start in verse 27 with Jesus announcing that his disciples will abandon him, “You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’” We then conclude this section with the record that, down to the last, his followers fled, even running off without clothes if necessary. “Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.”

So what do we learn from this section which is bracketed by Jesus predicting that he will be abandoned by his disciples and then this prediction coming to pass?

Let’s start by looking at Peter’s bold assertions in the face of Jesus’ prediction: Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not.”

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”

But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.

What is Peter’s hope in? Himself! It’s interesting that Peter’s emphatic wording here will be mirrored at the end of the chapter by his emphatic wording that he doesn’t know Jesus. As we well know, Peter fails.

However, it should be noted that although Peter has the biggest mouth and so speaks up, he’s giving voice to what the other disciples are saying, just not as loudly. All the disciples have a self-assurance that they weren’t going to abandon Jesus.

What is easily missed by us, and was missed by the disciples, was that Jesus didn’t ask them to rely upon themselves but rather gave them a word of assurance, “But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” Jesus wanted his disciples to look beyond their imminent failure of abandoning him and instead be assured that he would meet them again in Galilee.

How easy it was for the disciples, how easy is it for us, to so trust in our own strength and capabilities that we don't even realise that there is another way available. It was only about a week ago that I heard again someone say, "I've been wanting to go to church for a while but I need to get myself in a better place and be a better person before I come along." How tragic! How tragic that someone doesn't see that the message of Jesus, the message the church should be sharing, is that you don't have to get yourself together before coming to Jesus. Jesus promises to meet with us and gives us this assurance even when he knows that we have failed him and will fail him.

This trusting in ourselves and human plans continues over to verses 43 to 52 where Jesus is arrested and the disciples abandon him. In verse 47 we read of how one of the disciples decided to use his human strength and capability to try and rescue Jesus, "The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear." In John's Gospel we're told that this was Peter himself. As I've mentioned on other occasions, I wonder if the reason why Peter's name is not used here is because Peter doesn't want to be regarded as some great hero who took up arms to defend Jesus. The actions recorded here are not in line with God's plans but are the actions of a person seeking to use human means to fix this situation.

In this respect, the action of cutting off the ear of of the servant of the high priest is actually more closely aligned with Judas' actions.

Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard."

We already know that Judas had agreed to betray Jesus to the Jerusalem authorities and here we see how Judas' plans are coming to pass. Judas knew where to take an arresting party so that they could catch Jesus away from the crowds and Judas had arranged a sign, a kiss of greeting.

Trust in human strength and reliance on man-made plans runs counter to Jesus' character and work here. What is it that's guiding Jesus during this time? Notice the little statement Jesus says at the end of verse 49, "But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." See also how this compares to what was said at the start of our reading in verse 27, "for it is written." Jesus is being guided by trusting in and following the promises that God had made through the prophets in the past. This section of Mark's Gospel may be bracketed by Jesus predicting that he would be abandoned by his disciples and then this abandonment happening but it is also bracketed by Jesus having an assurance that what is taking place is in line with what God had promised beforehand and which is now being fulfilled.

This tension between abandonment and trust in the promises of God and not in the strength of people brings us to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane.

Jesus Alone In Prayer (vv. 32-42)

Jesus takes the disciples to Gethsemane and then asks Peter, James and John to accompany him further until:

he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

The task before Jesus was not something which he was undertaking lightly. At a human level Jesus was about to be abandoned by his friends, he would be betrayed by someone close to him, he would be beaten and sentenced in a rigged trial and then experience a terribly cruel method of execution. However, Jesus' primary struggle was now with what he was about to endure physically and emotionally but what he was facing spiritually. When Jesus asks, "Take this cup from me" it is most likely the reference to the cup of God's wrath that he pours out on wickedness. Earlier, when Jesus had passed the cup around at the passover meal, he had said that his

blood (his life) would be poured out for many and here we have another reference to a cup.

The Son of God, who has always had perfect fellowship with God the Father from eternity past to eternity future, who has always known himself to be beloved of the Father, is facing something never experienced by the Son before, enduring the Father's wrath. Jesus would indeed prefer that this hour might pass from him.

When Jesus prays, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Jesus is effectively asking if it is possible for him to be the Messiah, God's anointed rescuer of his people, without enduring wrath from his Father. The answer, as we know and as will be made clear, is that there is no other way. It is one of those occasions where the truth that God can do everything is counter balanced with the reality that God can not go against his nature. God can not rescue his people without their failure being dealt with and that is what the Messiah was to endure. However, it's clear though when making this request that Jesus surrenders to the will of his Father.

The disciples, when faced with the painful prospect of abandoning Jesus trusted in their own strength and showed a reliance in their own plans. Jesus' when faced with the unbelievably painful prospect of enduring the Father's wrath surrendered himself and sought to only trust in God's plans.

This contrast between the disciples' self reliance and Jesus' surrender to the Father's will is brought out even more strongly when we read about what happens when Jesus returns to his disciples and finds them sleeping.

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Jesus was not asking for the disciples to pray for him but rather for themselves, "Watch and pray so that **you** will not fall into temptation." The disciples are failing here because they are relying upon themselves, their flesh, rather than upon the Holy Spirit which would have been demonstrated in prayer.

At this point it would be easy to hear this message and say that the take home package is not to rely on ourself and our plans but instead to know what God promises in the Scriptures and surrender ourselves to God's care and plans.

However, as I mentioned at the start of this message, we don't do sadness and failure very well. We feel very uncomfortable to just sit in sorrow, in pain, in trouble, or in distress. As a counter to this, I'd like us to pause for a moment and consider Jesus' experience here.

Jesus is so desperately and utterly alone. Not only will his friends and followers abandon him and deny that they even know him but he is approaching his arrest and trial. More painful than that is the acute awareness of the spiritual suffering which he will experience as he willingly endures his Father's punishment of sin as a way to rescue God's people. On top of all this his closest friends can't even follow his example and stay awake in prayer, and instead are just nodding off. While all that is painful, I wonder if what made Jesus feel the most alone is that God the Father didn't answer him immediately. We know that the Father isn't answering Jesus because Jesus keeps going back and praying the same prayer.

Where do you feel alone? Where do you struggle with the pain of being misunderstood or not listened to? Have there been times when you've cried out in prayer and, despite asking time and time again, you still don't have an answer? Are there times when you'd just like some comfort? Jesus is not ignorant or immune to such feelings. It's important that we're honest about these feeling and experiences.

Luke's Gospel records that an angel strengthened Jesus during this time but Mark records for us that Jesus doesn't gain a firm answer until verse 41, Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

The word "Enough" here appears to carry the weight of "It is settled!" With the arrival of Judas, Jesus knows what the Father will do, the answer is settled. The hour isn't going to pass from Jesus and instead he's going to receive the cup from the

Father. Jesus had prayed that the Father's will would be done and now he shows his commitment to this prayer and his acceptance of his Father's answer by calling his followers to arise, to advance to the betrayer.

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, in one sense it would be easy to hear this message and say that the take home package is not to rely on ourself and our plans but instead to know what God promises in the Scriptures and surrender ourselves to God's care and plans. While that may be true, I think it's more important for us to bring to God our brokenness, our hurt, our loneliness and our pain.

We're going to listen to a song now which may describe how you feel about God sometimes, that he's just playing hard to get, and yet as we surrender and keep trusting we discover that God still loves us even though his ways and character are hard to get.

[Reflective Song - "Hard To Get" by Rich Mullins followed by The Lord's Prayer]

We're now going to pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray. You'll see a resonance between the words in the Lord's prayer and the way Jesus prayed as well as how he encouraged his disciples to pray to avoid temptation.