

John 18:1-27
(Psalm 75; Revelation 16:1,17-19)
“The Cup the Father Has Given Me”

Introduction

Most striking in this passage is Jesus' complete mastery of the situation. Although he is arrested, bound, beaten and interrogated, he is clearly the one in control. His hour has come. By facing his betrayer, he has become our advocate. By permitting himself to be bound, he has set us free. By dying, he has given us life. By embracing his destiny, he changes ours forever. For this he came into the world. He faces suffering and death with the words, "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (18:11).

In stark contrast is the tragic unraveling of Jesus' chief disciple, Simon Peter. Jesus' steadfast perseverance stands in counterpoint to Peter's instability and disintegration. Why? Is it the inevitable difference between the God-man Jesus and anyone who is merely human? No. Peter himself later wrote, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Thus, Peter tells us that by God's grace we should stand, rather than collapse as he had done, in the hour of crisis. Jesus made it clear throughout his ministry that in coming to us he had laid aside his divine prerogatives and chosen to live his life by those same means of grace available to all of us (see, for example, Philippians 2:5-8).

Why, then, did Peter fail the great test? Why did he collapse in the hour of crisis? And why do we so often fail to live and act as we thought we would when the great crises of life come, and we are called to make a costly stand for Christ? It is instructive to study the difference portrayed in these verses between Jesus and Peter, and to ask ourselves which better describes us.

Body

1. Note the contrasting attitudes with which they approached the crisis.

We see in sharp contrast Peter's stubborn pride over against Jesus' humble submission to his Father's will. The synoptic gospels describe the disciples' arguments on the road to Jerusalem, with Jesus telling them about the cross he was to face and warning them that, in order to follow him, there would be a cross for them to face as well, and their refusal to listen and heed his words, instead arguing over which of them would be the greatest in God's kingdom. John develops this theme in his dramatic thirteenth chapter, where Jesus warns them that they will all fall away, while Peter insists that he will lay down his life for Jesus before ever denying him.

Jesus lived in joyful submission to his Father's will, finding his food and drink in glad-hearted obedience. Peter was still in it for himself, hoping – by following Jesus – to become something more significant than a simple fisherman. Jesus laid aside his glory to save us, while Peter sought glory for himself on his own terms. These contrasting attitudes would play out when the storm of opposition finally broke over them.

2. Note the contrasting ways that they prepared for the crisis.

The synoptic gospels describe the events in the garden prior to Jesus' arrest, and what is striking is Peter's need of sleep in contrast to Jesus' need of prayer. Peter thought that it was most important to prepare his body for the coming crisis, while Jesus recognized that the most important preparation involved his spirit. And so Jesus said to his disciples, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:38). Without the four accounts given in the gospels, Peter's unraveling might be harder to understand, but the hours before Jesus' arrest were emblematic of deeper contrasts in Jesus' approach to life, and that of his disciples.

In the gospels we see Jesus rise before dawn and go out to a quiet place to pray. No disciple is with him. They are sleeping. More than once, we see Jesus alone on a hillside spending the night in prayer, while the disciples sleep. And here in the garden, having told them everything that is about to happen and having asked those closest to him to watch with him and pray, as he prays, they sleep.

3. Note the contrasting ways that they responded to the crisis.

John dramatically depicts Peter's explosive anger in contrast to Jesus' calm command and compassion. Peter has prepared for the crisis by resting, and now he is ready to go to battle in the strength of his flesh. But this is not a battle of flesh and blood. If it merely came to a knife fight, Peter had plenty of courage. He didn't yet understand that Jesus had come into the world for this moment, in order to give his life for the life of the world. He did not yet understand that kingdom courage is putting one's flesh in the service of the spirit.

Peter was still imagining a purely earthly kingdom with earthly rewards. But Jesus had come to clear the ground for his Father's Kingdom, a kingdom that transcends human and even cosmic history, while swallowing up both. Peter saw those who had come to arrest Jesus as enemies who must be defeated. Jesus saw them as unwitting servants of his Father's will. "Put your sword into its sheath. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" (18:11). Earlier, Jesus had prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass

from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." Now he submits to his Father's will. And his submission does not reveal one who is weak but rather one in complete command of the situation, because he is confident that he is doing his Father's will.

4. Note their contrasting self-understandings revealed in the crisis.

What lies at heart of all this is the stark contrast between Jesus' self-understanding and that of Peter, exhibited in Peter's three denials ("I am not") over against Jesus' three affirmations ("I am").

We saw in our study of Jesus' high priestly prayer, recorded in the previous chapter, that Jesus concluded the prayer by saying, "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known" (17:26). As we saw, Jesus' words harkened back to one of the most familiar scenes in Israel's history: Moses standing barefoot before the bush that burned but was not consumed. When Moses asked God his name, he was not asking for God's generic name, known to all the ancient people. He was asking God what was God's covenant name – we might say his family name – and God said, "Tell them I AM has sent you." The name was so holy, as we saw last week, that Israel would not say it, but would instead say, "LORD" whenever they encountered the divine name "YHWH" (pronounced Yahweh).

But when Jesus came, he not only spoke the name, but actually took the name for himself. Eight times in John's gospel, three times in our text, Jesus said, referring to himself, "I am." Our translators follow most others in translating the words as, "I am he." But if you look at the footnote to verse five, you will see that it reads, "Greek *I am*; also verses 6,8." John's Greek reads, "*ego eimi*" which is how the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament translates God's name, I AM. In other words, Jesus' self-understanding was defined in terms of his union with his Father. His whole identity came from his relation to God. And it was this identity that he gave to his disciples, to Peter and – to you and me.

But Peter did not yet understand: His life, so he thought, was still his own. He thought he was free, belonging to no one, autonomous – a law to himself. He thought that he could still go wherever he wanted, say and do whatever he wished, without consequences beyond his control. When asked three times whether he was to be identified with Jesus, he answered, "I am not!" And that was the basis of his unwinding and collapse.

Peter had to come to an end of himself, had to have his self-understanding and self-identity utterly destroyed, before he could write these wonderful words of praise, which he wrote as an old man to Christians facing persecution:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3f).

Conclusion

The key, I think, to understanding all of this is that these four contrasts are not merely *manifestations* of the difference between Jesus and Peter, but are *reasons* for the difference.

- New life begins with the recognition of an entirely new identity.
- New life grows in power through intimate communion with the heavenly Father through prayer.
- New life manifests itself in our relationships with one another as we learn to die daily to the old life of pursuing futilely our conflicting and destructive passions and desires, and instead begin to pursue joyfully the only life worth living.
- New life stands the test in the hour of crisis as it simply manifests the habits of the heart, the consistent pattern of living, not for ones' self, but for others, not for our will, but for God's will, to be done.

What of us? How will we respond to the crises to come, to the challenges we all must face in life? Are we living in humble submission to the will of God? Are we seeking him and asking him to give us a grateful heart? Are we pursuing his glory rather than our own? Are we able to face disappointment without explosive anger and unbridled emotion because we know who is control of human destiny? Are we unashamed of our Lord and Savior before a world that still mocks and seeks to silence him?