

Who's In Charge?  
Matthew 26:17-35

Well, Peter thought he was the bravest of all the disciples, didn't he? "Oh, I know that all the rest of these clowns may be offended at You. They may stumble or fall away, but I won't. I'll never deny You – I'm ready to die with you!" That's what he said. In fact, all of the disciples promised to stick with Jesus, no matter what happened.

Of course, given their expectations, it was easy for them to be confident. They thought that at any moment Jesus would declare Himself to be the Son of David and raise a rebellion against the Romans. And since they naturally expected to be the top advisors in the royal court that he would soon set up, they were confident that they could handle whatever important responsibilities Jesus would entrust to them.

Yes, it's easy to be confident when things are going our way. It's easy to be confident in our own strength and our own abilities, to depend on our own resources, when our pathway seems clear and when the circumstances of our lives seem manageable. And with our systematic theology so ably condensed in our Westminster Confession of Faith, it's especially easy for us Evangelical Presbyterians to imagine that we have it all figured out.

But then the storms of life hit us – the unexpected things, the hard things that overwhelm us. Just like tornadoes that rip through this area all too frequently, waves of sickness and grief and joblessness and even war come crashing over our lives. And where is all of our confidence then?

No, in the midst of such storms we are likely to be offended, to turn away from Jesus in our disappointment. And in verse 31, that's exactly what Jesus said would happen to the disciples. He said they would all stumble, they would all fall away from Him. And why would they do that? Because when He surrendered Himself to the mob, He destroyed all their expectations of worldly wealth and power, all their confidence in the glorious future they had envisioned for themselves. For they couldn't imagine a Messiah, a divinely anointed ruler Who didn't have armies of soldiers following Him. To them, a weak Messiah was no Messiah at all.

But what about Peter, the one who boasted that He was the bravest and the most devoted to Jesus? In verse 34, Jesus said that before dawn, before the rooster would have a chance to crow, announcing the coming of the morning light, Peter would deny Him three times. And at the end of this chapter, we find Peter doing just that. Instead of proclaiming his allegiance to Jesus from the housetops, instead of being willing to die with Jesus as he boasted that he would, Peter would refuse to admit even to a slave girl that he knew who Jesus was.

And Jesus knew that about Peter – that he was all talk. He knew that about all the rest of His disciples. And He knows the same thing about us – that in our own strength, even with the knowledge and the wisdom and the financial resources with which He has blessed us, we are helpless without Him. Jesus knows that if we try to withstand the storms of life in our own strength and power, we will inevitably stumble, just as the disciples did.

But the irony of today's passage is that we find the good news in precisely the same verse in which Jesus acknowledges our weakness. For it is in verse 31 that Jesus tells the disciples they will all fall away, they will all fail to be loyal to Him in their own strength. But in verse 31 we also learn why they would abandon Him, why they would all be scattered just as sheep run in all directions when something happens to their shepherd: they would all fall away, Jesus says, because it is written in the Scriptures.

Now, think about that for a minute. In verse 31, Jesus is quoting from the prophet Zechariah. But Zechariah wrote down those words some 500 years earlier. How could Zechariah have known that Jesus, the Shepherd of God's people, would be struck down? How could Zechariah have known that Jesus' disciples would all forsake Him and leave Him to die alone? Because Zechariah wasn't in charge either – God is.

And if we look at the whole verse from which Jesus quotes, this point becomes even more clear: "'Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate,' declares the Lord of Hosts. 'Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered.'" According to Zechariah, Who's really in charge? It's the Lord of Hosts Who

declares that all this will happen. It's the God Who leads the hosts, all the armies of Heaven, Who has all power in Heaven and on Earth. It's the God Who controls all the events of history Who can tell His prophets about something that would happen 500 years in the future. The good news is that we are not in charge – God is.

And in today's passage, Jesus gives us a glimpse of that absolute authority, doesn't He? For notice that in verse 18, Jesus sends two of His disciples into Jerusalem to prepare for the Passover meal. And Jesus casually tells them that a certain man will be glad to furnish them a room. Now, we aren't told if this man already knew Jesus, or if this man had extended such an invitation to Jesus on a previous occasion. Instead, Matthew leaves us with the impression that Jesus was simply able to command the use of a room in someone else's house. There is thus simply no room for doubt: Jesus in complete control of the situation.

Moreover, Jesus knew very well that Judas Iscariot, one of His own disciples, would be the one who would betray Him to His enemies. But once again in verse 24, Jesus says that Judas' betrayal and His own imminent death had in fact been ordained long before, and had been recorded in the Scriptures just as Zechariah's prophecy had been. In short, we simply can't escape the fact that God – that Jesus – is completely in charge of all the events of human history.

But is that good news? Maybe it's not for you. Perhaps you aren't fully trusting in God today, and so perhaps the thought that God is in charge of everything doesn't comfort you – perhaps it makes you afraid. If that's the case, let's take a closer look at what this God of sovereign power is really like. Let's take a look at how Jesus wields His absolute authority.

For He couldn't be more different than His disciples, could He? Remember, they were all jockeying for power, trying to gain the most influence and wealth in the earthly kingdom they expected Jesus to establish right away. On the contrary, in verse 29 Jesus makes it plain that He is ready to give up all the comforts and pleasures of this world in order that He might do the Father's will. In fact, He says He will not take another drink of wine, He will not enjoy another such feast until the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Oh yes, today's passage leaves no room for doubt that Jesus is in charge. But instead of pushing his followers around, instead of conquering countries and subduing unwilling peoples for his own glory, as so many tyrants both ancient and modern have done, Jesus does exactly the opposite: He is willing to give up everything in order to save His people. In fact, as He says in verse 28, He is willing to shed the blood of the new testament, the blood of the new covenant.

Now, as observant Jews, and especially while they were eating the Passover meal, the disciples would clearly have understood this reference. For the Passover was a memorial meal, recalling the time that God had delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. It was a remembrance of the last of the plagues God sent on the Egyptians, the killing of all of their firstborn. But God also told His people, the Israelites, how to avoid this plague. If they would take the blood of the Passover lamb and put it on the outside doorpost of their houses, God said He would pass over them and spare their own firstborn children from death.

And after the people had come out of Egypt to Mount Sinai and after they had heard the Law of God, God made a covenant with them. The blood of sacrificial animals was put on the altar and on the people, as they took an oath to follow God and keep His commandments. By taking this blood of the covenant on themselves, the people were pledging that they would die before breaking God's law – in much the same way as Peter and the rest of the disciples proclaimed that they would die rather than deny Jesus.

But when Jesus says that His blood is the blood of the new testament, the new covenant, He is saying that He is the Passover lamb, the One whose blood will cover His people to protect us from death. Jesus is saying that He is God's Firstborn, the One Who will pay the death penalty that all His people have earned by rebelling against God, breaking His covenant. Yes, Jesus may be the One Who is in charge, but Jesus is also the One Who is willing to die for all those over whom He rules.

And this Jesus, this God of power and might, wants to be close to us, to have a real relationship with us. Why else would He tell His disciples to take and eat the bread that represents His body? Jesus is saying that, in the presence of His Holy Spirit, He wants to come and live inside of us. Unlike so many human rulers, He doesn't want to break our wills and crush our spirits in order to get His way. No, He wants to win our trust so that He can lead us and guide us because we want Him to, and because we are grateful for the sacrifice He has made for us. Yes, Jesus may be the One Who is in charge, but He only wields His sovereign power for our good because He loves us so much.

But can such power and love really go together? Of course they can. Maybe you remember the massive tornado that ripped through Hattiesburg nine years ago, tearing up the front campus of the University of Southern Mississippi and destroying Westminster Presbyterian Church. But even in the midst of such terrifying, overwhelming power we saw the clear evidence of God's miraculous mercy.

Jeff Revette, pastor of Living Word Church, was on his way back from National Guard drill. He rarely drives by Westminster Church, but that was the route he chose on the day of the storm – in fact, he said that God directed him to take that path. When the tornado hit, Jeff jumped out of his vehicle and ran for cover, taking refuge next to the wall of the Church, in a corner where part of the building juts out.

Charlene Barefoot was also driving by the church at the same time. She had first decided to ride out the storm in her truck, but when she saw Jeff, a man in military uniform, run over toward the church, she figured he knew what he was doing and followed his example. She didn't reach the church wall, but did make it down into a culvert.

It was at that moment that the tornado ripped through the roof and walls of the church. Part of the structure fell directly on Charlene's truck – she would have died had she not leaped out of it moments before. But other parts of the shattered structure fell across Jeff and Charlene's hiding places, covering them and protecting them from the storm. The same power that destroyed the building protected those who sought shelter in its shadow.

And it's that same combination of power and love that we see so clearly in Jesus Christ. Yes, He has all authority, controlling all the events of history, both great and small. Yes, He rules and reigns over everyone and everything throughout time and space. But He freely chose to lay down that power. He chose to absorb the awesome force of God's wrath and curse. He was willing to be shattered in the storm of God's justice, shedding His blood for us. And in the very process of His own death, He made sure that all who trust in Him, that all who cling to the cross will be saved.

So, Who is in charge? Jesus is – this Jesus of amazing power and amazing love. So, instead of insisting on our own way, instead of running away from Him in fear, let us seek the shelter that only He can provide.