

A Key to Surviving Spiritual Crisis Luke 22:39-46

In the last two weeks, we have seen Jesus and his disciples face his impending execution. Jesus responds with courage and faithfulness, obeying God and offering his life for sinners (22:1-20). The disciples act cowardly and faithlessly, competing with each other, and betraying or deserting Jesus (22:21-34). What accounts for the difference? When spiritual crisis hits us, how can we succeed, like Jesus, rather than failing, like the disciples? In this section Luke tells a two-part anecdote to highlight the role of prayer in surmounting spiritual crisis, recounting both the role of prayer in Jesus' success, and the role of prayerlessness in the disciples' failure.

In this passage, Luke employs a particularly artistic style to underline his point. *Chiasm* – named for the Greek letter *chi*, written X, and otherwise known as 'inverted parallelism' – is the label for a literary technique that makes related points twice, in reverse order. Thus, the successive lines or ideas of a text can be labeled: a ... b ... b' ... a'. This technique is partly artistic, designed to appeal to aesthetic tastes, on the basis of its cleverness. At the same time, the technique is also functional, reinforcing a contrast in the text. In these seven verses, we find chiasm twice, and simple parallelism once. Luke packs this paragraph with literary technique both to appeal to aesthetic senses, and to drive home his point(s). Given that he went to the trouble to write this way, we should go to the much lesser trouble of reading this way. As a result, the devotional reflections will not follow the consecutive order of the text, but its chiasmic structure.

Day 1: Luke 22:40,45b-46 Why the disciples failed (a ... a')

Last week we reflected on the disciples failures: Judas betrayed Jesus, the twelve competed over their own greatness rather than honoring Jesus' supremacy, and then the eleven deserted Jesus at his time of crisis. In that passage, Luke makes no effort to explain their faithlessness; he merely drives it home forcefully.

Now he turns to explain why they failed. Or, at least, what necessary component to success was lacking from their repertoire.

Prayer.

When crisis springs up, or as it approaches, what can anyone do to increase the possibility of survival? Jesus tells them, though they do not listen, and so fail: "Pray that you will not enter into temptation" (22:40). The NIV curiously translates, "Pray that you will not *fall* into temptation." Actually, in this context, a better translation than either of these would be: "Pray that you will not

succumb to temptation.” There is little they can do to *avoid* temptation coming upon them: circumstances are not under their control, and Satan is actively pursuing their harm. What they can do – and all they can do – is to ensure that they *survive* the assault. Prayer is the key to survival. Yet they do not pray. Instead, stressed out by the thought of what is to come, they are exhausted, and fall asleep: “When [Jesus] rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep... ‘Why are you sleeping?’... ‘Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation’” (22:45b-46). Too late. The soldiers arrive; the sleepy disciples succumb to temptation.

We often cannot predict when temptation will strike us. Besides, spiritual strength is not instantaneous, but requires extended training. So likely Jesus has two sorts of prayer in mind: a general lifestyle of prayerfulness, and special prayer boosts in the face of crisis.

Day 2: Luke 22:41-45a Why Jesus succeeded (b ... b')

To underscore the importance of prayer, Luke contrasts Jesus with the disciples. Jesus urges them to pray in order to survive spiritual crisis; they do not bother, and they fall. Jesus, however, takes his own advice: he withdraws a short distance, and kneels down to pray (v41). And so, it comes as little surprise, when he rises from prayer, he is ready to face arrest (v45a). The disciples fail to pray, and fail in the face of crisis; Jesus prays, and stands firm.

The application is obvious. Not just that we should pray. But all the more, if the divine Son could not surmount crisis without prayer, much less can we.

Day 3: Luke 22:42 How Jesus prayed (c ... d ... d' ... c')

Luke imbeds a second chiasm within the first to underscore *how* Jesus prays. Jesus is a model not only of the need to pray when crisis approaches, but also of the way to pray in response to crisis.

c Father, if you are willing,
 d take this cup from me;
 d' yet not my will,
 c' but yours be done.

Jesus' prayer has four lines, but only two elements, each repeated twice: a statement of his personal preference (d,d'), subordinated to God's preference (c,c').

From this we learn two lessons. For one: we can speak our hearts freely – albeit respectfully – to God. “God, rescue me! Take this away. I do not want it.” For the other: ultimately, though, as worshippers of God, we submit to him and to what he decrees. Prayer serves both ends. It enables us to express our preference to God; it helps us to submit to his preference for us.

Day 4: Luke 22:43-44 What prayer may – or may not – do for us

Jesus cries out to God, and God responds in two ways. Or, more precisely, he responds in one way, and declines to respond in a second way. God responds by sending an angel, and that angel in turn strengthens Jesus. God does not, however, respond by commissioning that angel to defeat Jesus' persecutors. Or to rescue him from execution. *Or even to give him peace in the face of impending death.* The angel comes and strengthens Jesus, who then continues to pray *in anguish*, and who, strengthened, prays *more earnestly*, so stressed that the sweat beads up and drops off him like blood from a cut.

While the way that Jesus prayed is generally a good model for us to follow – “God, this is what I prefer, though I will submit to what you prefer” – we cannot be certain that the results of his prayer will always be replicated for us. Maybe an angel will occasionally come to minister to us. Maybe other times, God enters our situation directly. Still other times, he may send another Christian to us. Even when neither angel nor human being come, though, we can learn from the way in which God *did not* answer Jesus' prayer.

Pray, we are often urged, and “the peace of God will guard your heart and mind.” Sometimes, yes. But other times, the crisis may be so severe, and our distress so deep, that inner peace eludes us. We take comfort in this: at a time of great inner conflict, peace eluded Jesus himself. Ironically, it is the prayerless, stressed-out disciples who sleep peacefully. Jesus is far too strung out with anxiety for sleep to come, and all his prayer does not bring him peace. But what prayer does bring him – and what it can bring us – is the courage and determination to submit our will to God's. To obey him at any cost. And, especially, to overcome temptation.

Day 5: Mark 14:32-42 What Luke edits out

Last week, we compared Luke's account with those of Matthew and Mark, and discovered his artistry in employing a topical arrangement, in order to underscore the contrast between Jesus' faithfulness and the disciples' faithlessness. This week, a comparison with the parallel narratives in Matthew and Mark uncovers a different literary technique, but a similar emphatic purpose.

In short, in their accounts of this incident, Matthew and Mark provide considerably more detail. They recount directions from Jesus to his disciples. They note that Jesus pulls Peter, James, and John out of the group to go off with him. They provide more description of Jesus' posture and the content of his prayer. They describe Jesus returning to rebuke the disciples, not just once, but three times. They fill out the content of Jesus' rebuke. They record Jesus speaking particularly to Peter.

Why are Matthew and Mark much more expansive than Luke? What is going on here?

Luke has stripped out everything from this account, except what supports his take-away. The one lesson he draws from this account – the one lesson that he wants his readers to draw from this account – is this: “Pray, so that you will not succumb to temptation.” In his version, this is the first thing that Jesus tells his disciples, and it is the last thing that he repeats to them (nearly verbatim). The disciples provide negative example of it: they do not pray, and they fail. Interspersed within their negative example, Jesus supplies a contrasting positive example of the very same point: he prays, and though he continues to struggle mightily, he surmounts the challenge. This is the point – the only point – that Luke wants his readers to grasp from this incident. Sometimes more is less, and less is more; so he tells them this, and nothing else.

This is the point – the only point – that Luke wants us to take from this incident. So he tells us this, and nothing else. Will we learn it?

Day 6: Acts 4:23-31

The disciples come off as pretty hapless and hopeless in this incident. But through hard experience, they do learn from this misadventure. When Jesus is arrested, they all succumb to temptation, and desert him to save their own necks. But three days later, Jesus rises. And not long after, they receive his Spirit. That makes all the difference.

Early in the second volume of Luke’s work – Acts – the disciples find themselves again in crisis. They are arrested for preaching the gospel, and, after interrogation, are released under threat of punishment if they persist. How do they respond?

This time, they respond as Jesus previously urged: they gather together as the church, and pray for courage: “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” The effect? “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” From their failure, they learn to pray. God answers that prayer, granting them boldness through his Spirit.

May this also be our experience, learning from their failure to pray at all times, and all the more, in the face of crisis. May this also be our experience, since we, too, have the Spirit of God.