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UNDERSTANDING THE APOSTLES (PART 1): BEFORE THE ARREST OF THE LORD JESUS, DURING HIS ARREST AND CRUCIFIXION, AND AFTER PENTECOST

Introduction

We have been considering biblical examples of Appearance and Reality. From these examples, we seek to learn to be accurate in our understanding of people and what they are going through.

In this message, we will consider the example of the eleven apostles during three periods in their lives. The first period is before the arrest of the Lord Jesus; the second, during His arrest and crucifixion; and the third, after Pentecost. We will not be including Judas, who betrayed the Lord Jesus, hanged himself, and was not present during the crucifixion and after Pentecost.

The different responses of the apostles

Before the arrest of the Lord Jesus

Just before Gethsemane and the arrest of the Lord Jesus, the apostles appeared courageous, firm in their faith and determined to stand with Him in His trials. We read this in Mark 14.

Mark 14:26-31

26 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

27 And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, because it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.'

28 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

29 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not."

30 And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times."

31 But Peter kept saying insistently, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all were saying the same thing also.

All of them affirmed that they were ready to die with the Lord Jesus, even though He had warned them that they would all fall away.

They also affirmed their faith in the Lord Jesus on another occasion recorded in John 16:29-30, when the Lord Jesus shared with them the deep things in His heart and the deep truths of God.

John 16:29-30

29 His disciples said, "Lo, now You are speaking plainly and are not using a figure of speech.

30 "Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God."

These disciples had already believed in the Lord Jesus. Their further affirmation in verse 30 indicates they now had a greater sense of faith in Him and that He is the One sent from God.

During the arrest of the Lord Jesus and His crucifixion

Yet shortly after these bold and definite affirmations of faith in the Lord Jesus, when He was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, all the apostles scattered and fled. They left their Lord and Master alone in His most difficult hour. He would have deeply appreciated the apostles standing by Him during that period when He needed support and fellowship the most.

But this was not something that took the Lord Jesus by surprise. He had actually foretold this after their affirmation of faith in John 16.

John 16:31-32

31 Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe?"

32 "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.

When the Lord Jesus was arrested, they all left Him and fled (Mark 14:50). Peter, whose affirmations were the strongest among the apostles (Mark 14:29, 31), even denied the Lord Jesus three times.

Mark 14:66-72

66 As Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came,

67 and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Nazarene."

68 But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch, and a rooster crowed.

69 The servant-girl saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!"

70 But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too."

71 But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!"

72 Immediately a rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he began to weep.

From this passage, we note that Peter was trying to follow the Lord Jesus. He loved the Lord Jesus and did not want to leave Him alone. He wanted to be near Him. He was genuine and sincere in his words of affirmation. However, because of fear in his heart, when confronted, he denied three times that he was with the Lord Jesus.

It was a serious failure on the part of Peter to deny the Lord three times after his affirmation that he was willing even to die for Him.

The events from affirmation of faith by the apostles to the arrest of the Lord Jesus as recorded in Mark 14 took place on the same night. During this short period, the picture we get is one of the apostles turning from people with apparently strong faith and firm convictions to those who appeared weak, unfaithful, lacking in convictions, fearful and even cowardly. After all the things they had said and gone through with the Lord Jesus, they still deserted their Master and Lord in such a dreadful manner.

After Pentecost

However, after Pentecost, a very great change seemed to have come over the apostles. They became bold, faithful and effective witnesses for the Lord. They also exercised good leadership in the early church. They were indeed a good example to other believers.

In Acts 2, all the apostles were together bearing witness for the Lord. Peter began to preach a powerful and effective message.

Acts 2:14

But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words.

The following verses record the impact of Peter's message on the Jews who were hearing:

Acts 2:37

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

Acts 2:41-47

41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;

45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

There is strong evidence of God at work in that context and there was genuine, positive response of the people to the gospel and the ministry of the apostles. Thousands were turning to the Lord in true repentance and faith. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (v. 42). They shared their material possessions with those in need. There was gladness, oneness and sincerity of heart, and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The faithful ministry of the apostles and their uncompromising and effective preaching of the gospel continued in the midst of severe persecution.

Acts 5:18

They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.

Acts 5:40-42

40 They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them.

41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

What was the true state of the apostles?

The apparent great changes in the apostles during this short period of time (before the arrest of the Lord Jesus, during His arrest and crucifixion, and after Pentecost), can be puzzling and difficult to understand. If we merely look at the outward

appearance and manifestations, we may come to inaccurate assessments or conclusions.

A helpful approach would be to consider the following questions:

- What was the reality in these men, beneath the outward appearance, actions and manifestations?
- Were their faith of poor quality before Pentecost?
- Were they sincere in their affirmations before the arrest of the Lord Jesus or were their words empty?
- Were they unsteady, fickle-minded people without real convictions? Were they weak and unable to make a stand for what they believed in? Were they unreliable and untrustworthy?
- Why did the Lord Jesus choose them to be apostles, and entrust to them such a grave responsibility at such a significant time in the fulfilment of God's purposes?
- Why were they so effective after Pentecost? Was it because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? If the outpouring of the Holy Spirit could account for it, why are there still so many weak and ineffective Christians today even though we are living after Pentecost and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Qualities within the disciples

Let us learn to look beyond the outward appearance and seek to understand what the reality was in the lives of the apostles.

It is evident that there were weaknesses in their lives. For example, they disputed as to who was greatest among them (Luke 22:24). At other times, the Lord had to rebuke them for their lack of faith. But it is also clear that the apostles' faith was not shallow before Pentecost.

It would not be fair to conclude, from the apostles' responses during the circumstances surrounding the Lord's arrest and crucifixion, that they were fickle-minded and unreliable, men without convictions and who were unwilling to stand up for their faith. Some brief observations from the scriptural records will help to dispel such misconceptions about the apostles.

First of all, we notice the way they responded positively to the Lord Jesus' call to follow Him as recorded in Mark 1:16-20.

Mark 1:16-20

16 As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen.

17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."

18 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.

19 Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets.

20 Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him.

It is not easy to give up everything and follow the Lord. Nonetheless, we see Simon and Andrew leaving their nets and following the Lord. James and John even left their father in the boat with the hired servants and followed Christ. And as they followed Him, they had to go through many difficulties. Even when many of those who initially followed the Lord turned back from following Him, the apostles did not forsake the Lord, but continued on with Him (John 6:66-68).

Secondly, the Lord Jesus specially appointed these apostles from among many other believers. In choosing them, the Lord Jesus must have seen and appreciated their inner qualities as well as the potential within them that He could develop.

For three years, they were with the Lord Jesus, the Son of God and the Perfect Teacher. He taught them many things by word and by His life, and by going through many situations together with them. During this period, they must have learnt much from the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus also sent them out to preach, to exercise authority over the evil spirits and to heal the people of illnesses.

Mark 6:7-13

7 And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits;

8 and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belt—

9 but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics."

10 And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town.

11 "Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them."

12 They went out and preached that men should repent.

13 And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

When the Lord Jesus sent them on their mission, He instructed them to take nothing for their journey, but simply to trust God for provision. It required an exercise of faith for the apostles to obey this instruction. All these happened before Pentecost. Thus we see that they served the Lord faithfully even before Pentecost.

Thirdly, just before His arrest, the Lord Jesus testified about the apostles, saying, "You are those who have stood by Me in My trials" (Luke 22:28). In other words, during the three years, they went through many trials and hardship with Him. They were not those who deserted the Lord at the first sign of trouble and difficulties.

In spite of what we have considered about the apostles and the testimony of the Lord Jesus concerning them, two questions remain unanswered:

- Why did they not stand by their Master at the time of His greatest trial and need?
- Why did Peter fail so badly and deny the Lord three times?

Intensity of spiritual pressure

One cannot arrive at an adequate answer by merely looking at the external and physical aspects. It is necessary for us to take into account what was happening in the spiritual realm.

We have seen that though there were weaknesses in the lives of the apostles, there were also good qualities within them. Throughout their three years with the Lord, and before His arrest, they stood by Him and were sincere in their affirmation of love for Him.

What then account for the fact that they fared so poorly during their Master's hour of greatest trial? From what I can understand, one major factor is the intense spiritual pressure that was present during the period of the Lord's arrest and crucifixion. The spiritual pressure was too great for the apostles and they were not able to go through the situation properly.

But you may ask, why was there such intense spiritual pressure? We can recognise that the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus was an event of utmost significance in the spiritual realm. It was crucial to the fulfilment of God's purposes concerning the salvation of mankind. It was the climax of the Lord's mission on earth. It is not difficult to understand that at a time as momentous as this, the evil one would have summoned all the resources at his disposal to thwart God's purposes. Without doubt, an intense battle would have been going on in the spiritual realm. We can see evidence of this great spiritual struggle from the scriptural records of what the Lord Jesus went through at the Cross and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Paul tells us in Colossians 2:15 that through His death on the Cross, the Lord Jesus achieved a great spiritual victory over the powers of darkness. This would suggest that there was a spiritual battle being fought in the context of His death.

Colossians 2:15

When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

However, let us note that the intense spiritual battle did not take place only when the Lord Jesus was hanging on the cross. It took place before that, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark 14 records that the Lord was “deeply grieved to the point of death”.

Mark 14:33-35

33 And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled.

34 And He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.”

35 And He went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by.

An account of the same incident in Luke 22 also reveals that something important and very difficult was taking place in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Luke 22:43-44

43 Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him.

44 And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.

The description here, that the Lord prayed very fervently – that His sweat became like drops of blood – highlights the intense spiritual struggle that was going on as the powers of darkness sought to hinder the Lord from fulfilling His mission.

Some other verses indicate that the apostles too experienced intense spiritual pressure during this period.

After the supper in the upper room and just before He went to Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus warned Simon Peter and the other apostles about the imminent spiritual pressures and attacks:

Luke 22:31-32

31 “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat;

32 but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

Verse 31 shows clearly the evil scheme that Satan was conjuring up. The “you” in this verse has the plural sense in Greek. So although the Lord addressed these words to Simon, He hinted that Satan was going to sift like wheat not only Peter, but also all the apostles. Satan wanted to subject them to severe testing and spiritual pressures. Knowing how difficult it was going to be for Peter, the Lord tenderly encouraged him by letting him know that He had prayed for him.

The Lord Jesus knew that the apostles would not be able to withstand the spiritual pressures. Yet in this context, Peter boldly, but perhaps rashly, declared, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!” (Luke 22:33). Peter did not quite understand what he was about to go through. In reply to this assertion, the Lord Jesus said to Peter, “I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me” (Luke 22:34).

Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, after revealing to the apostles the deep agony within His own heart, He asked them to keep watch with Him, but they were not able to.

Matthew 26:40-41

40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?”

41 “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

The Greek word translated “could not” in verse 40 has the meaning of lacking strength or powerlessness. This is the same word used in Mark 9:18, on the occasion after the transfiguration, when the disciples were unable to cast out the evil spirit. Here in the Garden, it was not that the apostles were unwilling to keep watch with the Lord; they lacked spiritual strength to do so. This is implied in the words of the Lord Jesus: “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (v. 41).

Mark 14:40 tells us that the apostles were overcome by extreme sleepiness.

Mark 14:40

And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him.

It was an unnatural sleepiness that came over them. It was not that a few of them slept, but *all* of them did. They could not even give the Lord an adequate answer about their sleepiness.

Some may suggest that the disciples could not keep awake because it was late at night. But this is clearly not an adequate answer. The apostles knew that important things were taking place as the Lord Jesus had informed them earlier. Besides, some of them were seasoned fishermen who were used to staying up all night fishing. One such occasion is recorded in Luke 5:5.

There is a spiritual principle here that we should take note of. When something of significance to the Lord is taking place, there will often be spiritual opposition. And the intensity of spiritual opposition is often related to the significance of the issue.

It is also helpful to note that the failure on the part of all the apostles to keep watch and pray took place before the arrest of the Lord Jesus, not after. In other words, we can see that the spiritual attack was already taking place before the arrest. This helps us to see that the failure of the apostles during the arrest of the Lord Jesus was not merely because of fear at the physical level or on the natural plane but in the midst of spiritual pressure.

The Lord Jesus was fully conscious of what was going to take place even before their failure in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew that they would not be able to withstand the spiritual pressure and attack and had told them that they would all fall away because of Him that night (Matt. 26:31).

Given the weight of the issues involved in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the Cross, it is not difficult for us to understand why the apostles met with such great spiritual opposition as they tried to keep watch and pray with the Lord. In the face of the opposition and the sifting by Satan, their spiritual strength and determination failed them, and it even led to Peter denying the Lord three times.

The potential of the apostles

During this period, the apostles failed the Lord miserably. They appeared weak and lacking in quality of faith and commitment. Instead of looking promising, they came across as unreliable, untrustworthy people.

However, we cannot conclude based on the outward appearance. What we have considered earlier can help us get a more accurate picture of the apostles. We have seen that there must have been a certain degree of quality in their lives for them to be appointed by the Lord to be apostles. They faithfully followed the Lord for three years during which time the Lord Jesus personally taught and trained them. We have also seen that their failure could be attributed to the intense spiritual opposition from the powers of darkness during the pivotal period in God's plan and to their lack of spiritual strength.

When we reflect on the fact that even after their failure, the Lord still entrusted them with the Great Commission, we can reasonably infer that the Lord Jesus must have seen, beyond the outward, the potential within the apostles.

Matthew 28:18-20

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Acts 1:8

but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

The Lord spoke these words before Pentecost, before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Though they are relevant to all His disciples in general, they were directed towards the apostles. To be charged with such a grave responsibility of bringing the gospel to all nations indicates to us the confidence that the Lord had in the apostles.

In John 21:15-17, we see the Lord Jesus specifically speaking to Peter, whose failures seemed to be greater than the others.

John 21:15-17

15 So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs."

16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep."

17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."

Here the Lord Jesus told Peter three times to tend His lambs and shepherd His sheep. He also asked Peter three times: "Do you love Me?" Just as Peter had denied the Lord three times, the Lord repeated these words three times. Speaking to Peter in this way would have helped Peter to remember his weaknesses, and hence not to be self-confident, but to learn to humbly depend upon God. By telling Peter to tend His lambs and shepherd His sheep, the Lord Jesus was assuring him that He still desired to work with him and through him, and had the confidence in him to fulfil the task entrusted to him.

Though the responsibility the apostles had to shoulder was very significant and difficult, the Lord could see that they had the necessary inward qualities to fulfil it, and they did. Acts 2 describes how they faithfully testified of the gospel, by words and by life, even in the midst of fierce persecution by men and severe opposition by the spiritual forces of darkness. Under the apostles' able leadership, the church grew well and spread far and wide.

Concluding remarks

In this message we sought to understand the apostles in three periods: before the arrest of the Lord Jesus, during the arrest of the Lord Jesus and His crucifixion, and after Pentecost.

We have seen how, before the arrest of the Lord Jesus, the apostles appeared courageous and determined. The Lord Jesus did testify that they had stood with Him in His trials. But immediately after the Lord's arrest, they scattered and fled. They appeared weak, unfaithful and lacking in convictions.

After Pentecost, we see a dramatic change in the apostles. They became bold, faithful, effective witnesses. They exercised good leadership under severe persecution. Many turned to the Lord and the church grew.

If we merely look at the outward manifestations and conduct, it would be difficult to understand what was going on within the hearts of these men.

The fact that the Lord Jesus had chosen the apostles means that He knew they had potential. The apostles responded well to the call of the Lord Jesus, and were trained by the perfect Teacher for three years.

It is also helpful to recognise that this was a very crucial period in God's plan and hence a time of intense spiritual battle. The apostles failed because the spiritual pressure was too great for them. Though they were unable to go through that period well, the Lord Jesus could see the positive qualities within them and therefore continued to entrust to them the Great Commission.

They were able to fulfil the task well later because they had the necessary inward qualities, they were personally trained by the Lord Jesus for three years, and they were enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Let us reflect on our own lives. Are we happy with our own lives because we seem to be faring well? But is it so? Are we really spiritually healthy and strong? How will we fare when spiritual pressure and attacks intensify? Or are we discouraged at times because we seem to have failed so miserably? But how serious has been the failure? What are the factors at work in the situation?

We need to ask the Lord to help us understand our true state. What are the weaknesses in our own lives that the powers of darkness can take advantage of?

Just as the apostles had to go through a very significant event in God's plan – the Cross – we also need to prepare ourselves for a very significant period in God's grand plan – the last days, the Second Coming of Christ. Are we equipping ourselves to face the kind of pressure that will come upon us? If we allow any weakness to remain in us, we will be hindered from properly going through the difficulties. Let us ask the

Lord to help us understand how we can develop convictions, spiritual strength and true quality in our faith. Let us seek the Lord to grow well so that our faith will not falter in the face of mounting spiritual opposition, that we may be able to fulfil His call for us.

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