

THE GRAVITATIONAL PULL OF FEAR AND PRIDE **(John 18:1-19:16)**

This past Tuesday I read an internet article that was last updated on the very day I read it—June 13, 2023. The article claimed that planet Earth is populated by an estimated 3.04 trillion trees. That is trillion with a “t.” The article went on to say that means there are 422 trees for every person in the world. That is a lot of trees.

It occurs to me, that of those 3-plus trillion trees, some of them are quite famous. The General Sherman is the world’s largest tree by volume. It is located in the Sequoia National Forest, south and east of San Francisco. It stands 275 feet high and has a circumference of more than 102 at ground level. It would take at least 18 men standing fingertip to fingertip to surround the trunk. It is believed to be somewhere between 2300 to 2700 years old. It might have been a seedling a generation after the days of Isaiah.

Another internet search informed me that the world’s tallest tree is called the Hyperion. It stands in the Redwood National Park, north of San Francisco. It has risen to a height of 380 feet. That’s a tall tree. Compared to the General Sherman, however, it is just a young buck. It’s only about 800 years-old.

We have a famous tree in Oklahoma City. It is called the Survivor Tree. It is an American elm, and it survived the blast when Timothy McVeigh blew up the Murrah Federal Building in OKC. Today, visitors to the OKC National Memorial and Museum can sit under the shade of that tree.

Another famous tree in the US is the Methuselah tree. It, too, is in California. It is a twisted, gnarled, bristlecone pine. The Methuselah tree is located in the Inyo National Forest, which is part of the Sierra Nevada Range. Oddly, it is just west of Death Valley. The Methuselah tree is said to be over 4800 years old. That’s older than Randall and Larry put together. Actually, it’s even older than all of us in this room put together. I did the math. It is Randall’s age 53 times over and then some.

Let me tell you about another tree. This tree is in England, but saplings from this tree have been planted on every continent except Antarctica. In addition to about eight in England and one in Germany, saplings from this one tree have been planted in 14 different places around the United States, mostly on university campuses. The closest one to us would be at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. There are three locations in Canada, two in South America (both are in Argentina), and one is in Africa (close to Cape Town on the tip of South Africa). Descendants of this tree are also found in three places around Australia, one in Taiwan, two in China, and three in Japan.

The original tree dates from at least the 1600’s. The tree is still living, but it is definitely showing its age. It is gnarled and bent. It happens to be an apple tree, and when you were young, you probably heard a legend featuring this tree. The tale went something like this: As a young man, Isaac Newton was sitting under an apple tree. An apple fell from the tree, hit Newton on the head, and he discovered gravity.

Well, it didn’t go exactly like that, but when he was about 23, just after graduating with his BA from Cambridge, Newton left and went to his ancestral home in the countryside of Lincolnshire. That was a safe place to be because the Great Plague was ravaging the urban areas of England. As he was sitting under that apple tree, he saw an

apple fall, and some-thing struck the young Newton, but it wasn't an apple. It was a thought. Why did the apple fall straight down? Why didn't it fall sideways or up. Something must cause it to fall straight down. It was then that Newton began to form his theories of gravity.

The force that caused the apple to fall down is the same force that holds the moon in its orbit around the Earth and the planets' orbits around the sun. If the law of gravity was suspended, not only would objects on earth fly away, but the universe itself would fly apart.

Just as the law of gravity is at work in the physical world, there is a gravitational force being exerted in the spiritual world. While Satan is working to pull us down and pull us away from God, God is working to hold us up and draw us close.

In John 18 and the beginning verses of John 19, we find three men who succumbed to the gravitational pull of two very powerful forces—fear and pride. The lives of Judas, Peter, and Pilate warn us. Fear and pride converged causing Judas to betray Jesus, Peter to deny Jesus, and Pilate to condemn Jesus. Of the three, only Peter goes on to serve as an encouragement because he alone got up after he fell, and he alone was drawn back close after he had allowed himself to be pulled away. Regardless, Judas, Peter, and Pilate serve to warn us about the danger of fear and pride.

We are not going to examine nor even read all the verses of our text. Instead, I want to pick out the words and actions of these three men and learn how the twin sins of fear and pride lead us astray from following Jesus. We will look at three real and present dangers.

Danger #1: The Gravitational Pull of Fear and Pride Will Cause Us to Betray Jesus.

Matthew, in the 26th chapter of his gospel account, tells us the sad tale of Judas going to the chief priests and asking, “What will you give me if I deliver Him over to you?” They offer him 30 pieces of silver or 30 silver coins. He promises to do so, and they pay him on the spot.

What was Judas agreeing to do? The religious authorities wanted to arrest Jesus, but they knew they couldn't do it in public. That would cause a riot. They had to do it secretly, under the cover of darkness. Judas knew Jesus' travel habits. He knew where Jesus and His disciples were staying while they were in Jerusalem. He knew Jesus would go to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. He knew that would be the perfect place for the authorities to catch Jesus for it would be a very non-public place.

Back in John 13, after Jesus washed the feet of His disciples (including those of Judas), and while the dinner was going on, Jesus stunned everyone by saying, “One of you will betray Me” (13:21). Moments later, Jesus dismissed Judas telling him, in effect, “Go do what you gotta do,” and Judas left.

Jesus didn't try to stop him. He didn't stand up, point at Judas, and yell, “Traitor! Guys, he's out to get Me.” No, He didn't do that because just as Judas was intent on doing what he had planned to do, Jesus had to do what God had planned for Him to do since before the creation of the world.

Let's think for a moment. What was Judas' motivation for doing what he did? Why did Judas betray Jesus? Did he really do it just for the money? I don't think so. I

researched the value of the 30 silver coins in today's dollars. It comes out to about \$441. That is not an enormous sum of money.

What do we know about Judas? He was called by Jesus to follow Him as a disciple, and he did. He was one of the 12; so, he traveled with Jesus, heard Him preach and teach, and watched Him perform miracles. He went on mission for Jesus in which he preached and was given the power to cast out demons.

Judas must have had a great respect for Jesus. I imagine that Judas believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who was prophesied to come. I believe that Judas, like most everyone else, had a wrong idea of what that meant. Likely, Judas expected Jesus to be a military Messiah, one who would raise an army, overthrow the Roman occupation of Israel, and cause Israel to be an independent state once again.

But, it had been three years or more since Judas began following Jesus, and Jesus wasn't doing the kinds of things that he expected a military Messiah to do. It takes a lot of money to fund a revolution, and Jesus wasn't raising gobs of money. Jesus was operating on a shoestring and seemed content with that. He wasn't preaching revolution; He was preaching, "Love your neighbor," even if our neighbor is a Gentile or a Roman. Jesus had even taught His followers that if a Roman soldier makes you carry his pack one mile, you should volunteer to carry it another mile. Was Jesus expecting to kill the enemy with kindness?!

Judas watched as the number of those following Jesus began to shrink because Jesus was saying things that offended Jewish sensibilities. Judas saw how the opposition to Jesus was beginning to grow among the religious establishment. He saw a noose beginning to tighten, and he didn't want to get caught in it.

Maybe he thought, "If I get Jesus arrested, that will force His hand, and He will have to act." Maybe he even fooled himself into thinking that he was really doing Jesus a favor.

I don't know exactly what Judas' motivation was, but I do know that it was fueled by both fear and pride. He feared that things would not turn out well if Jesus continued on His present course. Judas didn't want to go down with the ship.

To change the metaphor, Judas had hitched his wagon to what he thought was a rising star. It now looked like it was a falling star, and he cut the rope that attached himself to Jesus.

Judas had thought that if Jesus came to power, then he as the trusted treasurer, would stand to be appointed to a high profile and lucrative post in the new government. Now, the prospects of that happening seemed slim to none.

The gravitational pull of the combined forces of fear and pride are awfully strong. They caused Judas to betray Jesus.

Beware, they may cause you to do the same.

We shouldn't be surprised that again and again Scripture calls out, "Fear not! Do not be afraid!" God said that. Angels said that. Apostles wrote that in their letters. Jesus said that over and over again. Fear will keep you from trusting Jesus and following Jesus.

- Fear keeps us from opening our mouths to tell the good news.
- Fear keeps us from opening our pocket books to support the work of the church.
- Fear keeps us from opening our hearts to receive what the Lord has for us.

Pride has the same effect.

- Pride says, “I’ll do it my way,” and that keeps us from doing it God’s way.
- Pride says, “I’ll trust my strength, my wisdom, my efforts,” and that blocks us from receiving God’s strength, God’s wisdom, and God’s help.

There is a reason that pride is listed as one of the 7 deadly sins. It kills the work of God in us, for us, and through us.

In sci-fi shows and movies such as Star Trek and Star Wars, it is common for the bad guys to latch on to a space ship with a tractor beam and pull that craft to a place where the occupants of that ship don’t want to go.

In the same way, fear and pride act like a tractor beam and they pull us to a place where we don’t want to go—a place of danger and a place of disobedience. The forces of fear and pride will cause us to betray our identity, betray the things we say we believe, and betray our Lord.

When you find yourself becoming fearful, pray. Ask the Lord to give you peace. Turn to His word. It will activate and stimulate your faith, and faith will evict your fear. When you find yourself becoming proud, confess that to the Lord. Pride is always the result of a vision problem. When become proud because we fail to see ourselves for who we really are, and we fail to see God for who He really is. If you suspect you just might be guilty of pride, ask the Lord to correct your vision.

Danger #2: The Gravitational Pull of Fear and Pride Will Cause Us to Deny Jesus.

Let’s turn to the actions of Peter. The first time Peter shows up in the story is John 18:10. Judas escorts a band of soldiers (not Romans soldiers, just temple guards) and religious leaders to the very place where Jesus was praying. Jesus identifies Himself as the one for whom they are looking. As they draw close to take Jesus into custody, Peter draws his sword and he uses it. Peter is a better fisherman than a swordsman. He swings his sword, but the target moves, and Peter manages to slice off the right ear of his victim. That indicates Peter was probably left-handed.

With His commanding presence, Jesus quickly ended the fight, and Luke tells us what John omitted—Jesus healed the man. He reattached his ear. He healed the man completely. Jesus went with the soldiers, and the disciples scattered.

Peter and another unnamed disciple, most certainly John, followed from a distance. Jesus was taken to the house of the High Priest. Jesus was taken inside. Peter and John wanted to get closer. It just so happened that John was known by the High Priest. He was able to get himself and Peter into the courtyard. Look at v. 17. Peter flatly denied being a disciple of Jesus.

Since it was spring, as you might expect, it was a bit cool. A charcoal fire was burning, and Peter stood there warming himself, as were others.

Before we pick up with what happens next, let me remind you what Jesus said earlier that night, while they were still in the Upper Room. We read in John 13:38 what Jesus said to Peter after Peter vowed the he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus said, “Will

you lay down your life for Me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied Me three times.”

We’ve seen the first denial. Now, let’s read vv. 25-27. Here we find the second and third denial. According to Matthew, Peter invoked a curse upon himself and swore that he did not know the man. Matthew also tells us that as soon as Peter heard the rooster crow, he went out and wept bitterly.

Why did Peter have the courage to draw his sword and take a swing but lacked the courage to say, “Yeah, I’m one of His students.”

In the first instance, Peter was acting in the flesh. Acting in the flesh is a form of pride. What I do mean by that? Paul wrote in Romans 8:4 that we are to walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Our actions will be guided by one of two things—what we want or what God wants. To do what we want or what we think is best is to walk according to the flesh. That is pride. To do what God wants and what He knows is best is obedience to the leadership of the Spirit.

When Peter grabbed his sword and began to fight, he was doing what he thought was best.

When I was young and did what I shouldn’t have done and got into trouble, my mom would look at me with more compassion than was warranted and say, “Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

We need to quit doing what we seem to think is a good idea at the time. That is pride, and it will lead us away from Jesus. It will lead us away from the place of God’s blessing.

Now that the adrenalin had subsided, Peter had time to think. His thoughts carried him away and fear snuck in. He may have thought, “My Master has been arrested. What are they going to do to me if I openly side with Him?” As a result, he denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times.

Do we ever deny Jesus because of fear? There must be a myriad of ways to deny Jesus, but they can be divided into two broad categories. Sometimes we deny Jesus by our lips and sometimes we deny Him by our lives.

We deny Jesus with our lips when we fail to take a public stand for Christ, when we fail to share Jesus with others, when we fail to start spiritual conversations.

We deny Jesus by our lives when we fail to live up to biblical standards of morality, when we try to fit in by compromising our Christian convictions, when we fail to practice the Christian disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, both public and private worship, and fellowshiping with other believers.

The Peter before the resurrection of Jesus was filled with fear. The Peter after the resurrection of Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and the presence of the Spirit in Peter’s life was the One who made all the difference.

If you want to escape the gravitational pull of fear and pride, you need the Holy Spirit present and active in your soul. Have you received Him, and are you surrendering to the Spirit’s leadership daily?

Danger #3: The Gravitational Pull of Fear and Pride Will Cause Us to Reject Jesus.

Pilate, the Governor of Judea, questioned Jesus. At that time, only Rome could carry

out the death penalty. It didn't matter what the high court of the Jews decided. This was Rome's decision, and Pilate was Rome's man in Jerusalem. After questioning Jesus more than once, Pilate could find no fault in Jesus, certainly nothing worthy of death.

Pilate had a legal right to free Jesus, but freeing Jesus was not the politically wise thing to do. Jesus had boldly spoken to Pilate about truth, but Pilate wasn't interested in truth. He was more interested in what was politically expedient. Look at John 18:37-38.

The drama begins to intensify. Notice what we are told in John 19:7-11. The drama climaxes in v. 12. Pilate found himself between a rock and a hard place. The rock was the fact that Pilate realized Jesus was innocent and not worthy of death. The hard place was that if he let Jesus go, the Jewish leaders would complain loudly to Caesar, and he would lose his position, maybe his life. The Jews had complained to Caesar before about the things Pilate had done. He knew he wouldn't get a pass this time; so, he did the expedient thing, the politically correct thing. He ordered the death of an innocent man.

It appears that the cancel culture has been around longer than we realize. Pilate didn't want to be on the wrong side of this particular issue, but he ended up on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of eternity. Pilate rejected truth, and in so doing, he rejected Jesus because Jesus is the truth.

Standing for the truth and standing for Jesus involves a cost. The cost may be great. You stand to lose friends, or a job, or your reputation, or something else you greatly value. Just remember, those things you stand to lose are temporary, but the reward of standing for Jesus and for what is right and true is eternal. Ask God to help you make the right choice.

We have looked at three men who made bad choices. They were turned aside by the gravitational pull of fear and pride. Maybe you have done something similar. Maybe in the past, you have betrayed Jesus, or denied Jesus, or even rejected Jesus. Know that failure doesn't have to be final. While there is life, there is still hope.

Learn from the life of Peter. The first thing Jesus said to Peter was "Follow Me." The last command that Jesus gave to Peter was "Follow Me," and He said that to Peter twice in less than a minute. Look at the last two words of John 21:19 and 21:21-22.

As we get close to Jesus, the gravitational pull of His person—His love, His grace, His kindness, His patience, His wisdom—is so great that it will overpower the pull of any other power in this world or in the unseen world.

My counsel to you is, "Get close to Jesus, and stay close." Friends, let's follow Him.