

The Dangers of Distance

Luke 22:54–62

Have you ever been deeply disappointed or discouraged by unmet expectations? Have you ever felt shaken to the core when life didn't turn out the way you hoped—when a prayer went unanswered, a breakthrough was delayed, or a door was slammed shut?

I want to suggest to you this morning that how you respond to those unmet expectations can have serious implications in your life. It can lead to discouragement, disillusionment, and even spiritual drift from the very One who holds your hope—a drift that often begins with following Him from a safe distance and then slowly progresses into compromise.

King David knew this well. In Psalm 62:5–6 he declares, “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.” David faced enemies, lies, and betrayal—even loyal followers turning against him (1 Samuel 30:6). Yet he learned to speak truth to his own soul, redirecting his expectations to come from God alone. As Proverbs 13:12 warns, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” When our hope is misplaced—in outcomes, people, or our own plans—we can become sick at heart, shaken, and prone to drift.

That same drift is what we see in Peter from today’s text.

Sermon in a sentence: Distance often leads to drift, which can progress into denial, but Jesus graciously pursues and restores us—so we fully depend on and delight in Him alone, bearing lasting fruit.

1. How the Drift Begins: Unmet Expectations and Following at a Distance

Let’s begin by considering how the drift begins—namely, through unmet expectations and following at a distance. Concerning Peter’s drift we read beginning in Luke 22:54: “Then they seized Him and led

Him away, bringing Him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance."

The Greek word for distance here is *makrothen*, which means far off. Peter is still following, but he's keeping a deliberate, protective space. He trails behind the procession, near enough to watch what is happening to his Master, but far enough to avoid being identified with Him in this dangerous moment.

Why the distance? The chaos in the garden has just unfolded: the kiss of betrayal, the mob with clubs and swords, the arrest of the One he loved. Peter's expectations are in ruins. He had wanted a triumphant King who would overthrow Rome and restore Israel's glory. Instead, he sees a suffering Servant being led away like a criminal.

A few weeks back in our series, we heard Peter's bold, overconfident vow: "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). And Jesus had prayed specifically for Peter's faith to survive the sifting that Satan demanded, foretelling this very failure and the rooster's crow.

But Peter trusted his own readiness, his own courage, his own performance more than the Lord's warnings. So when the crisis arrived, disillusionment flooded in. The price of following closely suddenly felt too high. Fear whispered, "Stay back or you'll be next." Self-reliance said, "You can handle this from here—observe, but don't engage." So Peter drifted. He followed, but at a distance.

But here's the deeper truth: in a very real sense, Peter had been following Jesus from a distance all along. Even when he walked beside Jesus, ate with Him, and called Him Lord, he was still trusting in his own strength, his own expectations, his own performance. He rebuked Jesus when He foretold His crucifixion (Matthew 16:22). He boasted he would never fall away even if others did (Matthew 26:33). He stepped out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus (Matthew 14:28–31), only to sink when his eyes left the Lord. The courtyard distance was not new—it was the crisis revealing what had been true

in his heart for a long time: he was close to Jesus in body, but often distant in full dependence and surrender.

This brings to mind the prophet Elijah after the battle with the false prophets on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18–19). Elijah called down fire from heaven, saw the prophets of Baal defeated, heard the people cry, “*The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God*” (1 Kings 18:39). He expected revival, the end of idolatry, a national turning to God. But Jezebel’s death threat came instead. In response, Elijah fled into the wilderness, collapsed under a broom tree, and prayed the most despairing prayer: “*It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.*” 1 Kings 19:4

Like Peter, Elijah’s unmet expectations led to isolation, despair, and a desire to quit. He saw failure instead of God’s sovereign plan.

This is the subtle start to the warning in Psalm 1:1: “*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked...*” The drift begins when unmet expectations shake us, and we pull back instead of pressing in.

As Peter Scazzero explains in *Emotionally Healthy Leadership*, we often have “disordered attachments” to outcomes, titles, security, or others’ opinions—pushing God out of the center. When these attachments are excessive, disappointment hits hard, and we drift for “safety.” But, again, as the psalmist said, true hope is from Him alone (Psalm 62:5).

Our ultimate hope and security is not in our own expectations being met, but in letting our expectations come from God—trusting that His will, His timing, and His plans are always good, because He is good.

As Darrell Ferguson puts it in his sermon: “Following Jesus can be dangerous. So Peter comes up with this new form of discipleship—‘I’ll still follow him, but at a safe distance so I don’t get caught up in what they do to Jesus.’ Best of both worlds, right?” That’s the temptation many face today—wanting the benefits of faith without the risks.

Beloved, where are you following at a distance today? Is it in your single life, your dating relationship, your church involvement, your marriage? Jesus sees your unmet expectations completely and is still committed to you. He's interceding, not always to spare the trial, but to refine you through it, so that you find your ultimate security and significance not in others or even in God meeting your expectations or fulfilling your plans on your timetable, but in being fully known and fully loved by Him, trusting Him when things don't turn out as you hoped they would.

2. What the Drift Looks Like: Standing and Sitting with the Wrong Company

Now let's see what that drift actually looks like—namely, standing and sitting with the wrong company. In other words, once it starts, it doesn't stay static—it progresses. For Elijah, that drift looked like fleeing alone into the wilderness, then hiding in a cave, wallowing in self-pity: "I only am left, and they seek my life" (1 Kings 19:10). He retreated to the wrong company of his own despairing thoughts. For Peter, Luke 22:55–60 paints the slide in vivid detail.

In verse 55 we read: "And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them." Peter warms himself at the fire kindled by the servants and officers of the high priest—**the wrong place**. He sits down among them—**the wrong company**. From following at a distance, he now lingers, then settles in. This is the progression Psalm 1:1 warns against: walking in the counsel of the wicked (distant following), then standing in the way of sinners (lingering by the fire), then sitting in the seat of scoffers (settled in their midst).

The less we delight in God's revealed Word—the law of the Lord that Psalm 1:2 says brings blessing—the more we lean on our own strength when expectations fail.

Then the pressure builds quickly.

In verse 56 a servant girl sees him in the firelight and says, “This man also was with him.” Peter denies: “Woman, I do not know him” (v. 57). A little later, another person says, “You also are one of them.” Peter: “Man, I am not” (v. 58).

An hour passes—enough time for fear to simmer, for self-preservation to harden. Then a third person insists, “*Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean*” (v.59b). Peter erupts: “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” (v.60)—and Matthew 26:74 and Mark 14:71 record that he begins to curse and swear to emphasize his denial.

The denials escalate—from a quiet refusal to a vehement, profane rejection. Peter is now fully compromised. He is in the wrong place, sitting with the wrong crowd, and his words have denied the One he once confessed as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

This progression looks painfully familiar in our own lives. Distance pulls us toward influences that mock costly obedience—perhaps conversations that erode our convictions, habits that numb our delight in God, or crowds that scoff at surrender. It hardens us over time. And we bear the bitter fruit of the chaff in Psalm one that’s blown away by the wind. The danger is real: proximity to the wrong company bears bad fruit—denial, compromise, even cursing what we once cherished.

As David Sorn notes: “Many of us end up following Jesus at a distance because we don’t want our association with Him to cost us anything.” That’s the subtle trap—faith on our terms, convenient and low-risk.

But praise God, the turning point comes. In verses 60–62, while Peter is still speaking, the rooster crows—just as Jesus prophesied. That proud bird becomes the voice of severe mercy, shattering Peter’s bravado. And then verse 61: “*The Lord turned and looked at Peter.*”

In the midst of His own suffering—mocked, beaten, on trial—Jesus turns His eyes toward the one who denied Him. This gaze is not one of condemnation or scorn. It is the same loving look that saw Judas

completely and loved him still, that healed the servant's ear in the garden. It is a gaze of sovereign grace that pierces the heart.

Peter remembers the word of the Lord, and he goes out and weeps bitterly—intense, sorrowful weeping that marks genuine repentance.

Beloved, in the drift, God doesn't abandon us—He pursues us with mercy.

3. How Jesus Restores Us: From Distance to Dependence and Delight

But praise God, the story doesn't end in denial or despair. Let's see how Jesus restores us—from distance to dependence and delight.

Notice something interesting: one of those who confronted Peter in the courtyard pointed out he was a **Galilean** (Luke 22:59). I want to suggest to you that like the rooster's crow, the word "Galilean" could have served as a subtle reminder and foreshadowing. Jesus had already promised the disciples—knowing they would scatter and deny Him—that after He rose, He would go ahead of them to **Galilee** and meet them there (Matthew 26:32; Mark 14:28).

The right response to the confusion, the doubt, and the unmet expectations would have been to retreat with the other disciples in prayer—bringing their shaken hearts to the Father, just as Jesus had taught them in the garden.

But Peter, in his drift, didn't do that. Again, he ended up with the wrong crowd. Later, he would retreat to Galilee—but on his own terms, not to wait on the Lord in faith, but to go back to fishing.

Yet even there, the Lord pursues His drifting disciple. He meets him right where he is.

Fast-forward with me again to John 21, on a quiet Galilean shore after the resurrection. The disciples have fished all night and caught nothing. At dawn, Jesus appears on the shore, and calls out, "Friends,

haven't you any fish?" and directs them to cast the net on the right side. The net fills beyond capacity with 153 large fish—yet it doesn't tear. Jesus already has a charcoal fire going, with fish and bread ready. And He invites them, "Come and have breakfast."

That charcoal fire is no accident. It's the only other charcoal fire mentioned in the Gospels—the same kind of fire where Peter had warmed himself and denied Jesus three times. The smell of burning coals would have brought the memory rushing back. But Jesus doesn't shame him. He invites him to breakfast.

Then come the three questions: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"—one for each denial. The first probes the old competitive root: "Do you love Me more than these?" But Peter, humbled now, drops the bravado: "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." No comparisons, only dependence on Jesus's perfect knowledge. And each time, Jesus commissions him: "Feed My lambs... Tend My sheep... Feed My sheep." Then the tender words: "Follow Me."

Three denials reversed by three affirmations of love. Three failures turned into three commissions to care for the flock. Peter's distance becomes dependence. His denial becomes devotion. He follows closely again—even to the cross—and becomes a fruitful shepherd for the church.

And amazingly, this restoration echoes the way God restored Elijah after he distanced himself in despair. Not only did an angel prepare a meal for Elijah at a fire in the wilderness, but the Lord met him right where he was—hiding in a cave, discouraged and alone. God spoke in a gentle whisper, opened Elijah's eyes and ears to a faithful remnant of 7,000, and recommissioned him, sending him to anoint kings and to disciple Elisha as his successor—giving him renewed purpose, relationship, and service.

Both Elijah and Peter were pursued in their lowest moments, met in their weakness, and restored—not to their own strength, but to dependence on God, delight in His presence, and fruitful ministry for His glory.

Beloved, Jesus restores us the same way. He sees our worst in the dark hour, loves us still, humbles us in failure, and restores us at His table of grace. No distance is too far. He kindles fires of mercy. He asks the healing question: “Do you love Me?” And when we answer humbly—not with excuses or performance, but with honest dependence—He draws us near again. He turns drift into dependence and delight. He turns barrenness into fruitfulness.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, following Jesus at a distance is so common today. We start with enthusiasm, ready to follow anywhere. But when the path turns costly—when expectations aren’t met, when faith might cost us popularity, comfort, or convenience—we pull back. We follow, but from afar. We linger in safe places, sit with crowds that don’t challenge us, and compromise slips in quietly.

Peter didn’t plan to deny the Lord three times; he drifted into it, step by subtle step. Elijah didn’t plan to pray for death; he drifted into despair. And we can drift the same way.

I think of the old saying, “Distance makes the heart grow fonder.” There can be some truth to it in human relationships. When someone you love is away for a time, you miss them deeply. You long for reunion, for embrace, for presence. FaceTime or phone calls can’t replace physical touch, hands-on acts of service, or quality time together. But distance becomes dangerous when it’s prolonged, when it becomes the norm, or when the relationship wasn’t healthy to begin with. Unresolved hurt, unfulfilled expectations, or discontent can fester.

And sometimes that discontent isn’t even the fault of the other person—it’s a deeper restlessness because we’ve looked to them, or to circumstances, or to our own plans to fill the place only God can fill.

I was talking recently with a pastor friend who was feeling deeply discouraged and depressed in his role as senior pastor. He was

wrestling with thoughts of quitting, of doing something else—anything else. Much of it stemmed from unfulfilled expectations: the church wasn't growing the way he hoped, people weren't responding as he thought they should, the burdens felt heavier than he anticipated.

I exhorted him, “Don’t make big decisions like this when you’re tired, discouraged, or depressed. Your sense of calling shouldn’t come from success, from expectations being met, or from performance. It should come from closeness to Jesus, from His heart. Elijah withdrew because he became disappointed, discouraged, and depressed.

There’s a difference between isolation and solitude. Jesus often withdrew to quiet places to be alone with the Father—that’s healthy solitude, a sacred space to replenish and rest in the Lord. But isolation is what a discouraged heart seeks to soak and wallow in self-pity. “Solitude is a chosen separation for refining your soul. Isolation is what you crave when you neglect the first.” Wayne Codeiro

My counsel to him—and to anyone here today who feels the pull of distance: Get close to Jesus again. Bring the disappointment, the unmet expectations, the discouragement to Him. Let Him meet you there. Because when you do, He restores. He draws you near. He reminds you that your ultimate security and significance are not in others seeing it your way, not in God meeting your expectations on your timetable, but in being fully known and fully loved by Him—and in learning to depend fully on Him alone.

Have you drifted because of distance? Are you disappointed with God?

The disappointment itself is not the greatest danger. The greatest danger is what we do with it—whether we draw near to Him with our honest pain, our questions, our tears, or whether we withdraw, pull back, and let distance grow. Jesus is not threatened by your disappointment. He invites you to bring it to Him. He has already carried the weight of it all on the cross so you would never have to face it alone.

So come close to Him and others who know Him. Depend on Him. Delight in Him in worship and the word. Follow Him fully, even when it costs you. Because the Savior who restored Peter and Elijah is the same Savior who restores you—from distance to dependence and delight.

He is faithful. He is near. And He is enough. Amen.