

Peter's Low Point

Mark 14:66-72

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One of the fun parts of living in a small town is that you know everyone in your graduating class. You not only know who they are, but you likely know their entire family. Often, you spent your entire childhood together, and you have many shared memories of those times. That's part of what makes class reunions so much fun—you get to share memories of your years growing up with the others who grew up with you.

But not everyone looks forward to such gatherings, because these people who watched you grow up also know all the foolish things you did, the mistakes you made, and some very embarrassing chapters of your life. Most of us are excited to relive the high points of our lives, but not so excited to relive the low points. If you feel like you made a really big mistake or had something very embarrassing happen in your childhood years, there's a good chance you avoid such reunions. Sometimes we feel trapped by the mistakes of the past, like those past failures define who we are.

This morning we're going to look at what was likely one of the low points of Peter's life. Peter had been a faithful, confident, and vocal disciple of Jesus. But on this night, Peter's overconfidence caught up to him. In a moment of weakness, he made a mistake which he likely regretted forever. But while sometimes this moment is what people think of when they think of Peter, we'll discover the Lord didn't define him by his greatest failure. The Lord offered grace and restoration. Peter's failure didn't define him, but it did shape him and taught him important lessons. The same can (and should) be true for us.

In The Courtyard

As we talked about last week, after Jesus was arrested in the garden, He was taken to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where he underwent an illegal trial that was more concerned about executing Him than they were about what was just or lawful. As all of this was going on, there was another, different kind of trial going on in the courtyard.

⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Peter was in the courtyard below. One of the servant girls who worked for the high priest came by ⁶⁷ and noticed Peter warming himself at the fire. She looked at him closely and said, "You were one of those with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁶⁸ But Peter denied it. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and he went out into the entryway. Just then, a rooster crowed. ⁶⁹ When the servant girl saw him standing there, she began telling the others, "This man is definitely one of them!" ⁷⁰ But Peter denied it again. (Mark 14:66-70a, NLT)

Peter had already shown great bravery and commitment to Jesus. He had been prepared to go to war with the religious leaders who came to arrest Jesus, even going so far as to cut off the ear of one of the servants of the high priest. When Jesus told him to stand down and gave Himself over to the religious leaders, it seems that most of the disciples fled, fearing they would be arrested or worse. Peter, however, did not flee. We are told he followed behind at a distance and snuck up to the home of the high

priest. He wanted to see what was happening to Jesus, even though he knew it could put him in danger.

So, before we look at Peter's failure, we should point out that Peter was one of the last disciples to fail. He was the only one (except maybe for John), who had followed Jesus to the high priest's home. The others had fled. Peter had actually shown great faith to this point.

In many ways, this is like the story of Peter walking on water. We often focus on the fact that Peter began to sink because he took his eyes off Jesus, but sometimes we forget something important—Peter walked on water! The other disciples didn't sink, because they were still in the boat. Peter may have failed, but he also was willing to step out when others stayed behind. The same is true here. Peter failed in the courtyard, but none of the others made it that far.

It would have been chilly at night at this time of year, so it's not surprising that the people gathered in the courtyard had a fire and were huddled around it. Peter was one of those warming himself by the fire, when one of the servant girls who worked for the high priest came by and noticed him. In the firelight it was not easy to see exactly who people were, so she looked at him carefully then concluded that this was one of the men who had been with Jesus.

Remember that the person Peter had attacked was a servant of the high priest. As another servant of the high priest, it is likely she had heard the story about Peter and connected the dots.

Once she realized who he was, she confronted him, claiming, "You were one of those with Jesus of Nazareth." Suddenly, Peter, who had been so concerned for Jesus that he hadn't given much thought to himself, became fearful. The servant girl didn't initially give any indication that she was hostile to him, but Peter's guard was instantly raised. He quickly became aware of the potential for danger. Initially he tried to deflect, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about." After that, he decided to go away from the fire (which would illuminate his face) and stand out nearer the entryway to the courtyard.

As Peter stood in this entryway another servant girl came and recognized Peter. She began telling the others that Peter was definitely one of those with Jesus. Once more, Peter denied it, hoping to distract from himself. He just wanted to find out what was happening to Jesus, and didn't want to deal with people getting him into trouble as well.

The Third Denial

Peter had denied knowing Jesus twice, hoping to get those gathered in the courtyard to leave him alone. But unfortunately, with the tensions high that night, they weren't ready to give up just yet.

A little later some of the other bystanders confronted Peter and said, "You must be one of them, because you are a Galilean." ⁷¹ Peter swore, "A curse on me if I'm lying—I don't know this man you're talking about!" ⁷² And immediately the

rooster crowed the second time. Suddenly, Jesus' words flashed through Peter's mind: "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny three times that you even know me." And he broke down and wept. (Mark 14:70b-72, NLT)

Now, apparently a small group came to Peter, this time citing his accent, which betrayed him as being from Galilee. This confirmed to them that this man must be with Jesus, who was also from Galilee.

Now Peter became indignant. He didn't merely deny that he was who they claimed, he declared that he didn't even know Jesus, and called down a curse on himself if he were lying! Surely Peter hoped that by this overly strong response, the people might be convinced to finally leave him alone.

Immediately after Peter made this statement, a rooster crowed for the second time. Luke's gospel tells us that as this happened, Jesus and Peter made eye contact, maybe as Jesus was being led away, or maybe just because Peter had been able to see into the room. Whatever the circumstance, this look from the Lord caused Peter to remember Jesus' words from dinner that night. Peter had boldly declared that even if everyone else left Jesus, he would remain faithful. He would stand with Jesus even if it meant certain death. Jesus responded by telling him that before the night was over (before the rooster crowed twice), he would deny three times that he even knew Him. As the rooster crowed, Peter immediately broke down and wept, realizing how much he had failed his Lord.

So what happened? What made this man go from swinging a sword for Jesus to lying about even knowing Him? What ultimately led to Peter's downfall?

I think at its root, Peter's downfall came from his overconfidence. Peter was self-assured because he knew how much he believed in who Jesus was. He was absolutely convinced Jesus was the Messiah. Unfortunately, this had caused him to place too much stock in himself. When Jesus told Peter he would deny Him, I imagine Peter simply shrugged it off, concluding that Jesus must not have understood how deeply committed he was.

Notice the difference between how Jesus and Peter prepared for their trials. Jesus spent the night praying, asking for strength and seeking to get His will in line with the Lord's. Peter, not fully realizing what lay ahead, fell asleep. This is instructive for us. If even Jesus needed to pray for strength, we certainly do as well. Left to our own strength, we will fare no better than Peter.

The Aftermath

Mark's gospel really doesn't tell us much about what happened to Peter after this event. I suspect that's because Peter was not the main point of the story—Jesus was. As such, we're left to speculate a bit about what happened after Peter broke down and wept, realizing he had failed the Lord.

The scriptures do give us a few clues about what happened. In Mark's gospel, after Jesus rose from the dead, we are told that the angel said to the women,

"Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. ⁷ Now go and tell his disciples, *including Peter*, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died." (Mark 16:6-7, NLT, emphasis mine)

Why would the angel think it necessary to tell the women to tell the news of Jesus' resurrection to His disciples, *including Peter*? Wouldn't you think Peter would be the first person that came to mind when you thought of Jesus' disciples? Why mention Peter separately and specifically?

I wonder if Peter had withdrawn from everyone at this point, convinced he had failed the Lord so fully that he was no longer fit to be called His disciple. You wonder, did Peter tell the others what had happened and tell them that he was no better than Judas?

Obviously, we don't know exactly why the angel said what he did, but it seems quite plausible that Peter was so wracked with guilt over his failure that he may have withdrawn from everyone else. Maybe the women weren't sure whether Peter was still considered part of the group. Whatever the case, the Lord, through this angel, makes it clear that Peter had not fallen so far that he could not be restored.

This is a message the Church needs to hear. There is an old saying that the Church is the only army that shoots its own wounded. We can debate whether that statement is factually accurate, but the point is that Christians often pile on one another when they fail. We are good at pointing out and condemning sin, but not so good at helping people pick up the pieces and working to restore them to fellowship. Peter's experience is a reminder to us that God is a God of second (and third, etc.) chances. Our past failures do not have to define us, and do not necessarily disqualify us from serving Him. Often, the Lord can use our failures to teach us, to soften us, and to mold us into the people He would have us be if we are willing to repent, listen, and learn.

John's gospel records Jesus gently confronting Peter's failure and then restoring him to fellowship once more. He shows Peter that his failure doesn't disqualify him at all.

¹⁵ After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you." "Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him. ¹⁶ Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love you." "Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said. ¹⁷ A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep. (John 21:15-17, NLT)

Much has been said about this interaction, but let me point out a couple of important points. Jesus asked Peter essentially the same question three times—this was not an

accident; it paralleled Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. While Peter was hurt, because he surely was immediately reminded of his failure, he also understood that Jesus was not pushing him away. Rather, He was calling him to a deeper commitment.

The second thing to see is that Jesus gave Peter marching orders. Peter was not supposed to simply sit and wallow in his failure. He was supposed to do something for the Lord. Jesus told him to care for the flock.

I wonder how Peter may have been different after this experience. Prior to this point, he was brash, bold, and self-assured. I wonder if Peter was often impatient with the other disciples, wanting them to be as committed as he was and wondering what their problem was. I suspect after this experience, Peter may have been a bit softer, a bit more humble, a bit more understanding and patient with people's failures. I suspect Peter had a much better understanding of what was needed to care for Jesus' flock.

Conclusion

Admittedly, this passage doesn't contain a lot of information. We are left with lots of questions and as a result we end up making a lot of guesses about what went on after Peter's denial. But even though this passage may not give us all the detail we desire, it gives us many lessons we can learn.

First, is the importance of standing with Jesus. As much as we might like to beat up on Peter for denying Jesus, we really don't have much room to talk. It doesn't take much for us to start acting like we don't know Jesus. Peter feared for his life (which was no excuse), while we will keep silent about our faith if we think it might make someone not like us. Many Christians have been persecuted for their faith through the years, some to the point of death. But as they stood firm, refusing to compromise their faith, even in the face of certain death, they gave a greater testimony than they ever could have in life. Their refusal to deny Christ spoke volumes to the watching world. We should have a similar level of commitment, refusing to back down from our faith, no matter what the world may try to do to us, because you never know how your choice to stand for Jesus may impact others.

Second, is the danger of overconfidence. Peter was committed to the Lord, but seemed to believe he had a better handle on things than he really did. We all have this problem at times. When we try to tackle things in our own power rather than relying on God's, we get into trouble. When we assume we have things all figured out rather than taking time to dig into God's word and seek Him in prayer, we are likely to get in over our heads. When we assume that we are strong enough to withstand temptation rather than running to the Lord for help, we will quickly discover our weakness.

The lesson is that we are utterly dependent upon the Lord. When temptation arises, we should ask for help to resist it. When we are faced with any task, we must seek God's strength and guidance. We should be people whose first instinct is to seek God's power in prayer instead of running ahead believing we are strong enough on our own. Peter's example reminds us that we are not, no matter how committed we think we are.

Third, failure doesn't have to define you. Most of us have things in our past that we are ashamed of. Maybe you have some really big failures in your past and find yourself haunted by them because you think that's all anyone can see. While it would not be correct to say that those things in the past don't matter—because they do, and we need to try to deal with our past sins—they do not have to define us. God's grace makes it possible for us to be forgiven and restored.

Most people think Peter was Mark's source of information. If that was the case, why would Peter include this story since it makes him look bad? I think it's because Peter understood that Jesus had forgiven him, and that others needed to see that forgiveness is possible, even for big failures. I suspect this failure became part of Peter's testimony to others—not because of how it made him look, but because it showed them how wonderful God's grace is.

Fourth, when we fail, we need to look for the lessons God has for us. When we fail, we are suddenly aware of our weakness. Our self-confidence is stripped away, and we realize how much we must depend upon the Lord. In those times, if we turn to Him (rather than running away from Him), we may discover lessons He may want to teach us. He may be working to humble us, soften us, or give us things we need to change. When you fail, look for what God might be trying to teach you. Often, we aren't able to learn these lessons until we recognize that we aren't as good as we think we are.

Fifth, understanding grace should change how we relate to others. We know we're messed up. Quite often, we can't believe that God would still love someone like us. That's the wonder of grace. But if we grasp that concept, it should have a profound impact on the way we deal with people around us. If we have experienced God's grace, we will desire to extend a similar grace to others.

Practically, this means we should be patient with people as they grow in faith, recognizing they are going to make mistakes and have setbacks. We should be willing to restore those who fail when they have acknowledged their failure and worked to make things right. We should be willing to extend a second chance when others are ready to write people off. We should offer forgiveness to those who hurt us. And we should rally to those who are beaten down, helping them to pick up the pieces and move forward with Jesus. The reason we do this is because we've experienced the difference grace makes. I think Peter was a profoundly changed person after his failure. I suspect he realized that if he could fall, even with the best of intentions, others can too. And after Jesus restored him, I imagine he had a newfound patience, humility, and softness toward others, because he understood how much we all need grace.

Each of us has failures in our lives, but those failures don't have to define us. They can be a driving force in helping us to make changes in our lives, and driving us into the arms of Jesus. Peter's failure reminds us that God hasn't written us off, and it reminds us that we shouldn't write each other off either. God's grace is transforming—and if we've experienced it, we should try to share it with others as well.

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