

Part 81: Failures and Faithfulness

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We often hear of infamous traitors. Shakespeare captured the pain of this when he penned Julius Caesar's shock "You too, Brutus?" Or think of Benedict Arnold whose betrayal of the Colonial forces in the Revolutionary war made his name forever synonymous with a being a turncoat traitor. Even our post-Christian world knows that to call someone "Judas" is to highlight their disloyalty.

These men couldn't seem to shake their signature sins. Today we read of the Apostle Peter's threefold denial of Jesus today—yet despite the weight of it, his story seems to be different. He isn't defined by his failure, but instead history shines brightly on Peter.

What's so special about him that he gets such a second chance? How is he able to rewrite his own story?

If you've ever read the Hebrews 11 and seen those who are affirmed as faithful—you might wonder if the author missed his Old Testament survey class. He commends Abraham, a doubting adulterer. He commends Sarah, a skeptical scoffer, Jacob, a deceitful manipulator, Moses, a stuttering murderer, Rahab a pagan prostitute, Gideon, a fearful coward, Samson, a sex addicted womanizer, and David a politically savvy sexual predator and murderer.

So how does the author of Hebrews commend these men and women? All these, he says, are "commended through their faith." What kind of faith, you might ask, is that? That's messy faith, that's broken faith, that's distorted faith. How can faith commend such broken people? And maybe that's you today. John Calvin said that this story in Luke 22 is "a bright mirror of our own weakness." It's not just Peter's story, it's our story. But if Peter's story tells us anything, it's that our only hope is in another author. The writer of Hebrews identified this master editor calling Jesus "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2, KJV).

That's to say despite what we see in our text today, Peter didn't rewrite his story. Jesus did. It was Jesus who predicted his fall, and Jesus who prayed for his restoration. That's the beauty of the gospel: our sins write the introduction, but the cross gets the conclusion.

However you'll notice that there's no neat conclusion in our passage today. The spark note version is Peter denied Jesus, and Peter left Jesus broken in guilt. It demands the broader story of Peter and of the gospel. When we hold that in tension we see how our passage today shows us Peter's challenges so that we might be prepared for our own, all the while pointing us to the only one who can make everything right again.

Our main point today is this: **The story of our failures can be rewritten by Jesus' faithfulness.**

Preparing ourselves for our own trials we will see this in two parts today: first we will see **Half-Heartedness and the Fear of Man** and second we will see **Hard-Heartedness and the Fear of God.**

Last week we saw Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane, and in verse 54, Jesus is brought to the high priest's house as he awaits his court case that will soon begin. While those trials take center stage in the morning, Luke draws us to Peter's own trials that night.

Notice how Luke introduces this: **Luke 22:54-56**, "and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him said, 'This man also was with him.'"

And here we see our first point today: **Half-Heartedness and the Fear of Man.**

Luke tells us Peter is following at a distance because he's showing us the new sort of caution Peter has in following Jesus. In C.S. Lewis', *Prince Caspian*, the four siblings return to Narnia but unlike the first time, Aslan is gone and what was once safe is now dangerous. The animals which used to be friendly, nearly kill Lucy, and the forest has become a dark and dangerous place. Peter can feel a similar change.

Jesus is bound, he is held captive, and in this hour of darkness the freedom Jesus and his disciples once enjoyed, is now being overtaken by an increasingly hostile people.

So he follows at a distance in an attempt to try and straddle the line between these two worlds. He comes in late so as not to be identified with Jesus, and he slips into the crowd while they light a fire.

How often do we sense similar moments in our own walk with Jesus. We want to be near to him, but we'd rather not be publically identified with him.

This is why so many people float in and out of churches instead of joining one. I was talking to one brother who was sharing the gospel in Southeast Asia and while some men had confessed faith and wanted to follow Jesus, none of them showed up for the baptism they scheduled. These men knew that by being baptized and joining the church they were being publically marked off and with that brought unavoidable tension with the world.

The gospel gives us a sort of dual citizenship. When we try to solve this tension through compromise it never works. It doesn't work because the nature of our conversion makes us distinct—we cannot avoid it. But secondly it fails to work because light of the world always catches up to us.

Isn't that what happened here. The fire lit up Peter's face and his attempts to fit into both worlds was exposed. Notice the insider/outsider, us/them language that Luke uses. If you have your **Bibles open** notice in verse 55, "they" kindled a fire and Peter sat among "them." But in verse 56, Peter is called out for being not with "them," but "with him" (that is Jesus). In verse 58, someone else said, "You are one of them" (that is the disciples). Peter responds saying, "I'm not one of them." To whom and with whom did Peter belong?

If you try to belong with Christ and with the world, you're going to get found out. There's no safety there. By the end of this Peter has distanced himself from the "them" of the disciples, and he's also been distanced by the "them" of the world. His half-heartedness got him a whole nothing.

This doesn't mean that we are not to engage with and live in the world. That's not the point. In fact the Bible assumes we will run into these moments of tension because we do live in this worldly kingdom and yet our ultimate citizenship is of a heavenly kind. We can't avoid this, but we can prepare for it.

Writing while older and wiser, Peter encouraged the church not to consider themselves as fellow citizens but as "sojourners and strangers" (1 Peter 2:11). He was caught off guard, but he doesn't want you to be. He says, **1 Peter 4:12**, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something stranger were happening to you."

This tension isn't strange. It's natural and instead of trying to avoid it, we need to be prepared who we will prioritize in the midst of it.

John Madden once said "If you've got two starting quarterbacks, you've got no starting quarterback." In other words, you can only start one. At some point, you will have to choose who you will start: your identity in the world or your identity in Christ.

Peter highlights why this decision is often so hard though. Was Peter with Jesus? Yes. Was Peter one of the disciples? Yes. Was Peter a Galilean who was part of Jesus' crew? Yes. Was it not Peter who a few hours ago zealously told Jesus, **Luke 22:33**, "Lord I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death?" Yes. Was it Peter who moments ago tried to take up swords with the temple guards? Yes!

In the *Hamilton*, George Washington tells the zealous Hamilton, "Dying is easy, living is harder." We often fantasize about discipleship on the extremes, but we forgot how hard the battle is in the mundane. Peter didn't fear death. But he did fear man. Why is it hard to stand with Christ in a world that stands against him? Because we like Peter fear the opinions of man.

It is no irony that Luke begins Peter's inquisition not with an angry Sanhedrin, a royal Herod or a powerful Pilate...but a small servant girl.

Notice how quickly the Rock of Church seems to roll down the mountainside: **Luke 22:56-60a**, "Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, 'This man also was with him.' But he denied it saying, 'Woman, I do not know him.' And a little later someone else saw him and said, 'You also are one of them.' But Peter said, 'Man, I am not.' And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, 'Certainly this man also was with him for he too is a Galilean.' But Peter said, 'Man, I do not know what you are talking about.'"

When I was on college, I had a class on reproductive health and the professor got out a big bowl of male contraceptives and began to pass them around the room telling the guys to take them. I remember watching that bowl come my way like it was a guillotine. Was I scared of the bowl? No. Was I scared of what was in the bowl? No.

What was I scared of? I was scared of what my classmates would think as they saw a perfectly healthy and socially well-adjusted college male admit to everyone that he was not needing to prepare for such ventures. I remember as my non-Christian friend next to me got the bowl before me and filled his pockets and all I wanted to do was die. I wanted to do anything to avoid looking different.

Students in here, you're living in a world different than your parents did. What the world tells you to say and do in order to fit in is going to provoke how you handle the response of other people earlier and in more powerful ways that it did for others.

The Puritan John Flavel wrote a little book called, "Triumphing Over Sinful Fear," it's very short and I would commend it to all of you because there is rarely something that causes us to sin than fear. Some of us sin because we have a wrong fear of God. Some of us fear because we have a wrong fear of Man. And both are more connected than we think.

Fear unaddressed, distracts our hearts from our heads and messes with the function of our faith.

We see that here as the most mouthy disciple was made mute in regards to his faith. Jesus is right there with Peter. At any moment he could have called out to Jesus for help. But why didn't he? Probably because the chains around Jesus' wrists profoundly chained Peter's theology.

The chains made Jesus seem weak, and this slave girl strong. Flavel puts it this way, **"It is evident that fear exalts people and belittles God. It thinks upon a person's harmful power so much that it forgets God's saving power. In this way, a mortal worm, which perishes as the grass, eclipses the glory of the great God, who stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth."**

Peter didn't forget his power and bravado, he forgot Jesus'. He assumed that Jesus power was ordinary and human like ours. Jesus already reminded his disciples, **Luke 9:23-25**, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself."

Peter misplaced his hope in Jesus, and instead of trusting in Jesus when things seemed hard with the eyes of faith—he trusted in what his world saw as strong which was the opinion of ordinary men.

But it's here I want to transition to our second point: **Hard-Heartedness and Fear of God.**

It's easy to look at the problems outside Peter: Jesus was arrested, there were guards present, darkness and cold crept in, people were making him uncomfortable. But behind the externals of Peter's half-heartedness there was a reality of hard-heartedness.

Our sins are never half-hearted. Our hearts always run hot. Half-heartedness is often the experience of those who have a hard-heart towards God.

Notice how James describes the progressive creep of temptation: **(James 1:14-15)**, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

We've all had moments where it seems sin comes as suddenly and unexpected as a sneeze. But the Bible tells us that sin, even when sudden and fleeting, is a sign of a deeper problem.

James uses the analogy of child birth, there's gestational period of sin which culminates in sudden actions. If I asked some of you men what you would do if an attacker ran in this morning, most of you will give me a really detailed description including the objects you'd use as weapons and the counter

attacks you'd employ. We would hopefully respond quickly, and suddenly, but only because years of Call of Duty and Mission Impossible films have grown slowly in our minds.

Our last few scenes with Peter show us sin acts quickly in the moment, but only because it grows slowly in our hearts. Peter's actions have changed, but his affections haven't. This whole time Peter has been thinking about his own self-sufficiency and abilities—boasting about his own greatness. He was able to follow Jesus on his own. He was able to take down the Roman armies. He was his own hope. When he was with Jesus he boasted in what he would do for Jesus in order to be great. When he was in the courtyard he boasted in his distance from Jesus in order to be seen as great.

It was the idolatry of his heart that quickly adapted to new circumstances. Sin is a matter of affection before it is a matter of action. We are naturally chameleons. Moments that seem to be a "crisis of faith" in the end are really just moments where the object of our faith is ultimately revealed. This was not a different heart than when Peter boasted before Jesus, it's the same heart seeking self-exaltation in a different way.

This is why behavior modification as a primary means of spiritual growth never works. Our behaviors grow out of our beliefs—and Peter here was confronted with the reality that though his belief in Jesus was sincere, it wasn't as strong as he thought. Only a change of heart can help here.

Notice three things about Peter's denial. First we see it was willful. Three times he did this. It was not a one-time mistake. It was an intentional false truth. The language and the triple denial is meant to communicate a full and willful denial.

Second, it was habitual. If you have your Bible's open look at how Luke talks about time between his denials. Verse 58, "A little while later someone else saw him and said, 'You also are one of them.'" Verse 59, "After an interval of about an hour still another insisted saying, 'Certainly this man was also with him..." He's not growing weary or talking himself out of it. Time isn't shaking his sin, it's establishing it as a pattern.

As time goes on, the new challenges only reinforce his pattern. Though his excuses don't seem to buy him the relief he wanted, he becomes addicted to it. And so often do we in our own sin.

And here we see thirdly, his sin was consuming. Like any habit that begins as a small choice, it quickly takes over our hearts and seems to consume and enslave us. I heard it said once that sin "brings us further than we want to go and keeps us longer than we want to stay."

Notice how Peter goes from denying a relationship with Jesus, to denying a relationship with Jesus followers, to denying knowing anything at all. His reality was being enslaved by his own sin. He was being more and more detached from truth, and there was no end in sight.

John Owen describes it this way, "Sin also carries on its war by entangling the affections and drawing them into an allegiance against the mind. Grace may be enthroned in the mind, but if sin controls the affections, it has seized a fort from which it will continually assault the soul."

How many of us have felt this same way? Maybe we have never outright denied Jesus like Peter did, but as another Puritan says, "All sin is founded in secret atheism" (Charnock). All sin denies the claim of

Christ. It wages war on what our mind believes, taking us captive by our sinful passions and desires. We can have an atheistic heart without an atheistic mind.

Paul himself seemed to know this experience and maybe you do to: **Romans 7:15, 18-19, 22-24**, "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

It can feel for some of us, either in our wrestling with doubt, our addiction to sexual sin or drunkenness, or the constant revolving door of whatever vices we might have that there is no hope. But the rooster crows.

Luke continues: **Luke 22:60b-62**, "And immediately while, he was still speaking the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he said to him, 'Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly."

It's almost as if Peter was snapped out of a trance. The look of the crowds bothered him, but the look of Christ broke him. Peter was presented with a new and greater fear, the fear of God and the knowledge of his failings.

Though the cycle of his sin was broken, the waves of condemnation had fallen upon him. He came to his senses and quickly realized he had bigger problems in life than a slave girl. He was with Jesus back in Luke 12 when Jesus said that those who do not acknowledge him before men will not be acknowledged before the Father.

He recalled Jesus' words, the very words he said would never be true, and he felt the bitter weight of reality. Maybe you read passages of scripture which speak of the darkness of your own heart and you doubt that as well. But what Jesus says about you is always true—one day you will realize it. And some day that day is too late.

But so long as the rooster crows, there's time to look to Christ. One day we will see the face of Jesus as the trumpet sounds. That day is a day too late. But today, like an alarm clock for our sin-stricken soul—the face of Christ can awaken us.

It was not in the interrogation of the crowd, the light of the fire, or even the shrill of the rooster that brought Peter conviction, instead it was the face of Christ.

Jesus predicted not only that Peter would momentarily fail and fall, but he predicted that Peter would turn again. It might interest you that Luke never mentions Peter again in the book of Luke. This is where Peter's narrative falls away, just as Peter's faith did.

But any reader of Luke's gospel knew the full story. For they read Luke's second book, the book of Acts where Peter repentant and humbled, is a pillar of the Christian church. The readers knew that Peter did in fact turn again. One commentator said, "'Peter was saved because he denied his denial; he recanted his recantation.'"

But so that Peter would turn again, so that we would turn again, so that any would turn again, Christ has first turned to us. He has looked sinners in the eyes, and broken the spell of sin. Who can deliver us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ my Lord.

And while the look of Christ brings conviction, it brings with it also the promise of grace. It's not the conviction of sin a Christian should fear—it's a lack of conviction. When conviction comes in the face of Christ so does grace.

Paul says this in **Ephesians 5:13-14**, "But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon you.'"

John Calvin talks about the gaze of Jesus at Peter like this: **"But in looking at Peter, he added to his eyes the secret efficacy of the Spirit, and thus, by the rays of his grace, penetrated into his heart. Let us therefore know, that whenever anyone has fallen, his repentance will never begin, until the Lord has looked at him."**

Do you feel like your story is already written and like Peter it is that of failure? Christ has looked upon you, look to him. He was tried three times, and suffered faithfully so that those who fail might find refuge in him.

As J.C. Ryle says so wonderfully, **"Never had master such poor, weak servants as believers are to Christ, but never had servants such a compassionate and tender Master as Christ to believers."**

Do you find yourself dull to your own sin? Christ is looking upon you! Turn to him! Often times we attempt to manufacture a certain kind of conviction by staring at our own sin—but this too can be a self-centered act that brings only worldly sorrow. It is not our sin in the abstract that leads us to repentance, but instead it is the glory, the beauty and the majesty of Christ against whom our sin is committed that brings our wrongs into clear focus. Proverbs 16:6 says, "By the fear of God men depart from evil."

Some of you need to take your eyes off yourself and your sin and stare Jesus in the eye. A fear of sin only comes when we have a right fear of God, so look him in the face. Pick up his word and read Colossians 1 or Revelation 5. Behold his glory and trust that it will work its divine effect.

As the old hymn says, "O soul, are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness you see? There's a light for a look at the Savior, and a life more abundant and free! Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

What give strength to half-hearted cowards? What softens hard-hearted sinners? The face of the Jesus we denied. Come and look at him. Come and realize our sin is only half the story, the cross gets the rest.