

“An Epic Failure”
Matthew 26:69-75
February 16, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Failure is not an uncommon biblical theme. Genesis 3 records the failure of the first human couple, Adam and Eve. The rest of the Old Testament describes God’s efforts to call out a people of his own among the descendants of Abraham. We would have to say that this effort too was marked by far more failures than successes. And then we come to the Gospels of the New Testament. The Deliverer sent from God comes, and his own people reject him and crucify him. At one level, it would seem that the Bible is an historical account of losing every battle but then winning the war at the end. Failure seems to be the norm.

I read recently of an organization called the “Voluntary Human Extinction Movement.” It is a network of people who are committed to ending the human race by refusing to reproduce. The movement is motivated by an extreme form of environmentalism that reasons that since humans are the cause of severe environmental damage, then humans should be removed from the environment in order that our planet might be rescued from our harmful effect upon it. In other words, the environment is their ultimate good. The human race, on the other hand, is such a failure that it should be extinguished.

It’s hard to argue that the human race is not marked by significant failure. Even the best of us fail miserably, with the exception of the only perfect human ever to live, our Lord Jesus. Today’s passage describes an epic failure, not of some low level follower of Christ, but of the leader among Christ’s followers. Peter, which means “rock,” a name given to him by Jesus, proves not to be so rock solid after all. One of the strongest indications of the authenticity of the New Testament Gospels is their honest portrayal of the failures of the chief leaders of the early church. This passage speaks more clearly about that than any other. Peter was the chief among the twelve disciples. Not only does he fail, but he does so repeatedly and in a cowardly manner at the most critical moment. But this passage does more than authenticate the historical accuracy of the Gospels. Peter is all of us. Who among us has not failed Jesus at one point or another? Is there hope for us? The heart of the gospel gives hope. We may fail Jesus, but he will not fail us. The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement may have given up on humans, but thankfully the Creator of the human race has not done so. Our hope in Jesus is strengthened as we look carefully at Peter’s great failure.

I. The Seriousness of Peter’s Failure

After Jesus' arrest, Peter followed Jesus and those arresting him to the palace of the high priest, Caiaphas. Peter kept his distance but somehow made it past the gate and into the courtyard of the house. While Jesus was enduring a trial inside the house, Peter was enduring one outside the house, in this courtyard. A servant girl of the high priest is there, and she recognizes Peter as being one of Jesus' disciples. She makes a statement that could be taken either as an accusation or merely as an observation. **"You also were with Jesus the Galilean"** (v. 69). Peter took it as an accusation and denied it in a classic way. **"I do not know what you mean"** (v. 70). Claiming ignorance is a common form of lying. It doesn't seem quite as severe as an outright lie, even though it clearly is dishonest.

Peter concludes that it might be a little too risky to be inside the high priest's courtyard, so he decides to leave the premises and stands outside the gate. But there is another servant girl there, and she makes an accusation that is a little more aggressive and threatening than the first servant. **"This man was with Jesus of Nazareth"** (v. 71). Notice that she is speaking to the bystanders, not to Peter. Others are being brought into the realization that Peter is a follower of Jesus. Since this second accusation is stronger than the first, Peter's denial is stronger too. **"And again he denied it with an oath: 'I do not know the man'"** (v. 72).

A short while later, an even stronger accusation comes, not from a single servant girl, but from the crowd of bystanders. **"Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you"** (v. 73). Apparently, Galileans had a distinctive and recognizable accent. And since Peter always found it difficult to keep his mouth shut, the crowd had abundant opportunity to hear him speak. Peter's ensuing denial is the strongest yet. **"Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man'"** (v. 74). To invoke a curse is to say, in effect, "May God curse me if I'm not telling the truth!" It is an implausible denial. Jesus was the most famous Galilean at the time, yet Peter, a Galilean, claims to know nothing about him. Peter seems here not to have a shred of faith remaining. In his curse that prays God's judgment on all liars, he is defying the living God who honors truth and punishes falsehood.

Did you notice the escalation? The number of accusers increases each time, along with the seriousness of the accusations. The intensity of Peter's denials also increases each time, concluding with his insistence that he doesn't know Jesus, accompanied by a curse. And then Peter gets further from Jesus each time, starting in the courtyard but then drifting away. One of the lessons we can learn from this is that you can't sit on the fence with Jesus. Peter was attempting to do just that. He was not ready to abandon Jesus, seen in the fact that he was still following him. But neither was he prepared to follow Jesus into suffering. Such neutrality always results in abandonment of Jesus.

Peter's denial of Jesus was a serious matter. Jesus had taught earlier the importance of acknowledging him. **“So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven”** (Matt 10:32-33). That is precisely what Peter has done.

II. The Source of Peter's Failure

Peter's denial of Jesus didn't arise all at once. The source of his failure wasn't just that he was having a bad day or a moment of weakness. Rather, it was the culmination of a path he had been on for quite some time. I note three parts that led to Peter's denial of Jesus.

The first factor leading to Peter's denial was his instrumental view of Jesus. By an instrumental view of Jesus I mean that Peter viewed Jesus as a tool to help him get what he wanted. And what did Peter want? The Gospels make it clear that Peter wanted Jesus to restore Israel's place as a powerful nation, with Peter right under Jesus as one of its top leaders. Peter's purpose had no place for Jesus' suffering, with the result that Peter once rebuked Jesus when he spoke of his coming sufferings and death. And now it seemed to Peter that what he had wanted from Jesus was never going to happen. Jesus had been a tool for him to get what he wanted, and now that Peter was not getting what he wanted from Jesus it appeared that the tool had failed. So the only thing left to Peter is to take matters into his own hands to save his own skin. So he distances himself from Jesus, resorting to outright lies in order to do so.

Is an instrumental view of Jesus a problem in today's Church? What about the health and wealth gospel? This gospel says that if we have the right kind of faith in a sufficient amount, then God will give us what we want. God is viewed merely as a tool to get what we want. But what we most want is not God himself but what he can give us. And when we don't get what we want from him, the result is often the same as it was for Peter—abandonment of Jesus.

Another form of this instrumental view of God is to view him merely as a ticket into heaven. I was talking to someone this week who was telling me about a survey done among a couple dozen people. They were asked, “Would you still want to go to heaven if Jesus weren't there?” Everyone except one answered that they would. Only one woman said, “It wouldn't be heaven without Jesus.” When Jesus first called Peter, he didn't say, “Pray this prayer and you can go to heaven when you die.” He said, “Come, follow me.” This calls us away from an instrumental view of Jesus and into a relational view. We are called to follow Jesus and be with him. We are called to trust him no matter where he leads us.

A second error in Peter's life that led him to this denial of Jesus was his self-confidence and its accompanying prayerlessness. Remember Peter's response to Jesus' prophecy that all the disciples would fall away. **"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away"** (Matt 26:33). It was a response brimming with a sense of superiority over others as well as self-trust. Those two things usually go together. Peter was saying, "I can believe that these other disciples will fall away, but not me. You can count on me, Jesus. Even if I have to die with you, I will not deny you." Right after that, Jesus invited Peter, James and John to pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. He urged them to watchful prayer, and they responded by going to sleep. The longer I live, the more convinced I become in the truth of what Jesus told his disciples on the last night of his life. **"Apart from me, you can do nothing"** (John 15:5). When you really believe that, you learn to pray. When you don't pray, it's because you don't believe what Jesus said about our inability. I think I always gave mental assent to that truth, but it has taken me years to really begin to believe it. If Peter had believed it and prayed in Gethsemane, he would not have fallen at this time.

A third reason for Peter's fall is found in the repetition of the little word "with" in the accusations made of him. In the first two, Peter is confronted with the words, "You also were *with* Jesus the Galilean." In the third, the crowd says, "Certainly you too are one of them." Peter is distancing himself both from Jesus and his people. It is when we do the same that we put ourselves on this path that leads to a denial of Jesus. We also learn from this that Jesus and his people go together. Peter removed himself from both. To follow Jesus is to be with his people. To be against the Church is to be against Christ. I have seen this happen too many times in my years as a pastor. With loss of commitment to the church comes a loss of commitment to Christ.

III. The Solution to Peter's Failure

Is there any hope for those who deny Christ like Peter did? The last verse of our text is the verse that gives hope. **"And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus."** It is only in remembering the words of Jesus that we can find hope. This remembering has reference primarily to Jesus' words predicting Peter's denial. But I think Matthew intends the additional message that we must remember all the words of Jesus. As Peter wept, he needed to remember Jesus' words, **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"** (Matt. 11:28). He needed to remember words spoken by Jesus earlier this very night when he instituted the communion meal. **"Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"** (Matt 26:27-28).

Can even the sin of denying Jesus be forgiven, especially in light of what Jesus had said earlier about those who deny him? Remember that he had said

that he would deny those who deny him (Matt. 10:33). It would seem, then, that Peter has forfeited his salvation through this denial. We know, though, that Jesus does indeed forgive and restore Peter, so the mercy of Jesus is great enough even for this great sin.

We are going to look next week at another of the twelve disciples who let Jesus down. Judas betrayed Jesus, but his sin was not forgiven. Is the difference that denying Jesus, as bad as it is, is not as bad as betraying Jesus? I don't think so. Why was Judas not forgiven and restored while Peter was? I think it is that Judas didn't remember the words of Jesus. Judas regretted what he did, but his sorrow led to despair. Peter regretted what he did, but there was still a seed of faith in his heart that looked to Jesus.

We read a great deal about Peter in the rest of the New Testament, particularly in the book of Acts. We see him there as the solid rock Jesus said he would be. The one who here cursed himself as he denied Jesus preaches the first sermon in Acts 2. Instead of being filled with fear when threatened by the authorities, Luke records that he was marked by boldness. He had been transformed by the grace shown him by Jesus. Some have wondered what Peter felt after this incident every time he heard the crowing of the rooster. Some have thought that perhaps he wept again. I don't think so. I think he remembered afresh the grace of Jesus, leading to a heart of gratitude and joy in the gift of forgiveness earned by Jesus and given lovingly to Peter.

CONCLUSION:

In just a few minutes, a poem from my favorite poet will be sung. It is George Herbert's "Love Bade Me Welcome" in which the character "Love" is symbolic of Jesus. The author pictures himself as being welcomed into a banquet, but his guilt and sense of unworthiness makes him unable to enter into the joy of the event. But "quick-eyed Love" sees his reticence and draws near to ask him if he lacks anything. He replies that he lacks worth. Then ensues a dialogue between the unworthy guest and Love in which Love says that he will make this unworthy guest worthy. The unworthy guest is unconvinced that such a thing could be possible until the line comes on which the whole poem turns. "And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?" The guest accepts that, but then thinks his rightful place is that of a servant at the banquet. Love will not have it. "You must sit down, and taste my meat." In other words, Love will be the servant. And then comes the simple ending line: "So I did sit and eat."

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 26:69-75

1. If you could live your life over again, what's one thing you would do differently?
2. The answer to the previous question takes us into the area of failure. We have all failed in multiple ways. Peter fails in his three denials of Jesus. As you read this passage, what do you think Peter was feeling and experiencing?
3. We noted in the sermon that there were three sources of Peter's denials. They didn't arise all at once, but were in process for quite some time. One of those was Peter's instrumental view of Jesus. That is, he followed Jesus because of what he believed Jesus would do for him (restore Israel's power and place Peter as a top leader). Do you see in yourself or others any of this instrumental view of Jesus?
4. A second source of Peter's denial was his self-trust and its resulting prayerlessness. Peter didn't believe that it was possible for him to deny Jesus, in spite of Jesus saying that he would. Peter didn't believe what Jesus had just taught them that "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). What would it look like in your life if you believed that?
5. A third reason for Peter's fall was his isolation from both Jesus and his people, seen in his denial of being *with* Jesus and with his disciples. Do you battle isolation at times? What does it look like for you?
6. Read carefully the "Love Bade Me Welcome" poem of George Herbert. Which part of this poem most resonates in your heart?

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin. But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack from my first entrance in, drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning if I lacked anything. "A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here." Love said, "You shall be he." "I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot look on thee." Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, "Who made the eyes but I?" "Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame go where it doth deserve." "And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?" "My dear, then I will serve." "You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat." So did sit and eat.