

Introduction

I have no doubt that many of us have found ourselves on our faces at some point in time. Our head is in our hands. The tears are flowing. Our head nods back-and-forth as though in disbelief. We are saying to ourselves and to God, "what have I done?" It is too late; the thing cannot be undone. But there we are. A sin we hate, a thoughtless word spoken that cut someone deeply, an opportunity missed, an angry outburst, or even the thing we said we would NEVER do, and yet we did. Now there is shame; now there is regret; now there will be unavoidable consequences, confessions, pleas for forgiveness. Still we say, "How could I?" And then we wonder, "God, are you done with me? Will you cast me out? Have I wandered too far? Is there any hope for me?" Is there any evidence that God forgives even the gravest of sins committed by a follower of Jesus Christ? How low can a Christian go?

This morning we turn to an example of a Christian going very, very low. You cannot go much further down than Peter went when he was hanging out in the courtyard of the high priest. And yet it would not be the end. In fact his brightest, most amazing moments serving Christ were still to come. But let's consider how low he went.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main idea of this text is that Christ's followers must not lose hope even when they fail terribly. Christ's followers must not lose hope even when they fail terribly. Christ's closest and most notable followers can and likely will fail the test of faith miserably at some point. And yet, it does not mean all hope is lost. In fact the brightest days could be ahead if that follower will respond rightly to his failure. We are going to examine Peter's denial of Christ, and then I want to encourage you with a number of important truths to which believers must cling especially when we fail the Lord.

I. Aspects of Peter's Denial of Christ

As we work our way through the details of Peter's denial, we observe that certain characteristics of the denial present themselves which underscore how low Peter went in failing the test of his faith.

A. Firstly, we need to point out that this denial resulted from an accumulation of other failures and sins. The Peter that was sitting out in the courtyard of the house of the high priest was an unprepared man. He was not sober-minded. He was not watchful. He was on a downward spiral. He did not take one sudden step to plummet from a mountain top into the valley of denial. No, he had been descending into the valley for a while. Peter took several steps of declension on his way down.

It started with self-confidence. Jesus warned Peter and the others that they would all fall away. But remember how Peter responded? "Not me Jesus! Now they might, but not me. I will never fall away." Peter was so sure of himself. He could easily admit that others might deny Christ, but never himself. Here is certainly one of the reasons many of us end up sinning in ways we never thought we would. It is because our confidence is in ourselves. We have this sense about ourselves that we are invincible. We are better than that. Pride is the root of this kind of thinking. And God is opposed to the proud. We will not be victorious over temptation because we think we are better

than that. No, victory begins when we admit that we are not better than that; in fact, we could fall to anything.

The next step in Peter's decline was a refusal to listen to Jesus. The Lord authoritatively declared that Peter would in fact deny him three times before the rooster would crow that very night. But Peter just disputed the Lord, "I will not deny you!" No matter how loud you get, you will never be able to drown out the truth. And so you dare not speak in opposition to the Lord of the universe.

Resistance to the word of the Lord was followed by sleeping when he should have been praying. So here he is in the courtyard. It is a place where a spiritual battle is going down, and he is unprepared. Now he is going down.

Just know that the major failures in our lives often occur when we are self-assured, inattentive to the word of God, and prayer-less. March onto the spiritual battlefield without the armor of God and we are destined to fail, and it could be major. Be so careful when you may feel like you are Goliath; you are in a pattern of wandering because you are self-assured. You neglect the word and you neglect prayer and suddenly a little stone thrown by a little servant girl could be the occasion of a great fall. Beware. An accumulation of smaller sins may well culminate in your going lower than you ever thought you could.

B. A second characteristic of Peter's denial is deceit. In the first case Peter acted like he did not understand the assertion of the servant girl, who said, "You were with the Galilean." Maybe it wasn't a straight-in-your-face lie, but at best a deceptive maneuver. In the second and third cases, Peter straight up impersonated the devil. He denied he was with Jesus and even that he knew him. Lying itself is an assault on the holiness and justice of God. Whenever you are even tempted to lie, look out; sin is crouching at the door.

C. So now let us notice a third characteristic of Peter's denial. It was shameful. Peter was ashamed of Jesus before men. He is acting this moment out of the fear of man rather than the fear of God. He is ashamed of what servant girls and bystanders think of him if he admits to being a follower of Jesus more so than he is of what God thinks about him for denying Christ. That is indeed shameful. Gone are the soldiers with their swords and clubs. Here are servants and bystanders in the court of the high priest. They are really so much less of a threat than what he had witnessed at Gethsemane. But before these he cowers and fears for what? His reputation! The Jews of Jerusalem looked down on those from the North—in the region of Galilee and from towns like Nazareth, the village of crooks and low-life. Here before the fine folk who live in Jerusalem, Peter disassociates himself from Jesus because he does not want to be identified as scum. And it is shameful. It is shameful every time we fear man rather than God. It is also idolatry.

D. Fourthly, Peter's denial is multiplied in its sinfulness. Not only did he deny the Lord and lie, he swore and cursed and made an oath. Peter used every ounce of these dramatic elements to seek to authenticate his denial. Here is sin upon sin upon sin. Most of our darkest and deepest and lowest failures are the same. It is not just one sin. It is sin plus one layer after another of sin. And there is a pile of sin a mile high.

E. Then we also should notice that Peter's denial is truly shocking. I mean here is the man who answered when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that the Son of Man is?" Here is the one who said, "You are the Christ the son of the living God!" Here is the one to whom Jesus responded saying, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father

who is in heaven." He is this one who walked with Jesus on the water. Looking away from Jesus he began to sink; and he then cried out, "Lord, save me." Peter boldly called Jesus Messiah and Lord, but now when bystanders suggest that he is a follower of the Galilean, he says, and notice what he says, "I do not know the MAN." Could you imagine hearing a long-time friend of yours say about you to someone else, "I do not know the man or the woman"? According to Luke, Jesus and Peter could see one another. Perhaps Jesus could hear Peter. Peter did not just deny the Lord; he crushed him. He is "the man." How low can a Christ-follower go? Very, very low!

F. Next, we should notice the completeness of Peter's denial. That aspect comes across in that he denied him three times. The number three in the Bible represents completeness. When Jesus was crucified, darkness was over the land for 3 hours. Jesus was in the tomb 3 days. God is 3 persons. Paul asked 3 times for the removal of his thorn until God said it is enough. Peter now denies Jesus once, twice, and three times. It is a complete denial. You can hardly go any lower than Peter went here.

G. Finally, we are directed to the heart-rending conviction of Peter's denial. When the rooster crowed, Peter came to his senses and remembered what Jesus had said. Luke tells us that Jesus looked at Peter. He was cut to the core. He went out and wept bitterly. Peter responded to the recognition of his colossal fall with a broken heart. Now when conviction breaks over you and you feel the weight of guilt and shame and regret, you can respond in one of several ways. You can run and continue to try to hide and deny the fact of your disgrace. You can tell yourself that there is no God or God does not see or that this guilt is just a biological result of chemicals in your body and it is an illness. You can plunge deeper and darker into hiding your sin and denying its evil. This appears to be what Ravi Zacharias did. O how many respond to sin just this way. It is a path of destruction and judgment.

But there are some who are so greatly burdened they can't escape the tell-tale heart within them. And they are without hope. They respond to the inescapable awareness of their depravity by plunging themselves deeper and deeper into hopelessness. They drown in a sea of sadness because the consequences of their sin are overwhelming. They have remorse but no repentance. These are not so much sorrowful over their sin as they are over its terrible and irreversible consequences. Next time we will look at Judas and in him we see remorse.

But as we look at Peter's response to his sin, we see a third reaction. He recognized his denial as evil. So he wept bitterly, but he did not weep in despair. He wept with a broken heart over the fact that he had gone so low against the one he loved more than any other. He wept because he was ashamed. He wept because his heart was broken. However, it is clear that Peter had not lost all hope. Perhaps he remembered the words of Psalm 51. David after his sin with Bathsheba is crying out for God's mercy and forgiveness and cleansing from his sin, and he says, "O Lord, you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. [But] the sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Peter was not on the path to destruction but on the path to reconciliation. There is a place for sorrow in the life of the believer, and it is not optional. It is necessary. James writes, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you" (James 4:8-10). That is what David did and it is what Peter was doing. Their humility over their sin was the first step toward forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

Are you in the anguish and agony and sorrow of sin this morning? You went far, far from God. You have gone so low you didn't think you could or would go that low. Or maybe you haven't gone that far, but still the pangs of your sin wrap themselves tightly around you. You need to be sorrowful. You need to feel the horror of what it is to sin against Holy God, against the One who loves you. Return to him with a repentant heart, sorrowful but resolved to turn from that sin.

II. Lessons from Peter's Reconciliation with Christ

This text tells us only of Peter's denial and sorrow, but Matthew wrote this account years and years later at which time Peter was recognized as the leader of the apostles. It would have been evident to all that Peter's denial was not the end of his usefulness but a humbling trial that tested and proved the genuineness of his faith. It prepared him for astonishing usefulness in the years that would follow. So having seen just how low Peter went, I want to point out to you some comforting facts for miserably failing sinners.

A. First, Peter's experience demonstrates that the strongest of Christ's followers can sin miserably. Here we have Peter, the most vocal of the Twelve, the one who stepped out on the water with Jesus, and the one who would be the spokesman on the day of Pentecost and the leader of the early church. And it was he who most vocally denied the Lord as well. The comfort of this point is not to minimize the denial. No, Peter went very, very low. The comfort is that when you feel as though no one could have sinned as badly as you and when you are tempted to think Christ would not have you back because of what you have done, you should remember Peter. The testing of the faith of believers is going to happen, and when our faith is tested sometimes we WILL sin. Thinking on Peter does not lessen our sin, but it tells us others have been there before without being cast aside. We may sorrow without being in despair if we take the path of repentance.

B. A second comforting fact from Peter's experience is that the Gospel is for miserable sinners. The gospel of Jesus is a message not for perfect people but for sinners. Jesus declared that he did not come for the righteous but for sinners. It is not the well who need a doctor but those who are sick. The good news of the Bible is that Christ Jesus came to save sinners. He lived in complete submission to the will and law of God. He died on the cross for crimes he did not commit. He was a lamb unblemished and spotless. He suffered the just penalty due to sinners whose sins were placed on him, and he was estranged from the Father in their place. And he arose from the dead as the victor demonstrating that his offering for sin was enough. The gospel is that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." God's call to salvation and reconciliation with him is directed at sinners. And those who will turn from sin and trust in Jesus will be saved. There will be no condemnation for them. They will be brought from being without hope and without God in the world to be made the children of God and to look forward to the coming ages in which he will show them the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward them in Christ Jesus.

This glorious gospel is not for people who think they are good. There is none good; no, not one. And before you can recognize that this gospel is a message for you, you must realize that Peter's denial is a picture of your life from the moment you were conceived. But if you know yourself to be a sinner, a rejecter of Christ, a lover of self, you may call upon the Lord and be saved. Trust in Jesus Christ and you will be declared righteous in God's sight. There is no more urgent matter for you today than this one, if you have not yet turned to Jesus. Do not wait another moment.

The gospel is also for those who have already turned to Christ. Every day we sin. Every single day we deny Christ in one way or another. The gospel is our hope from moment to moment. Because

Christ died in behalf of his people, if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Oh what comfort!

C. And thus we come to a third comforting fact from Peter's experience of denial and reconciliation. If you belong to Christ, you can be sure that even when you fall deep into sin, the One you fail will never fail you. Jesus says of his sheep, "I give them eternal life and no one will snatch them out of my hand." He holds his sheep fast. Luke tells us that right before informing Peter that he would deny him, Jesus warned Peter that Satan had demanded to have him that he might sift him as wheat. Jesus also told him, however, "but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

Peter failed the Lord, but the Lord did not fail him. The Lord assured Peter's abysmal denial was not an utter failure of his faith. His faith did not fail even when he sinned, but the genuineness of his faith was demonstrated in how he responded to the fact that he had sinned so miserably. Faith in Christ will not necessarily keep us from every sin, but it will keep us from utter despair when we realize how despicable our sin is.

Christ knows his sheep. He gives them eternal life and they will never perish and no one is able to snatch them out of his hands or the hands of the Father. Take comfort dear sheep in that! When you, as one of Christ's sheep, find yourself in sin, repent knowing that Christ ever lives to intercede for you. We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous one. And he will hold us fast.

D. Finally, Peter's experience of denial and reconciliation teaches us that our past failure does not define our future. Again, we look to the depths to which Peter descended on this night, but we look ahead to the days after Jesus arose. Jesus appeared to the disciples and addressed Peter directly. Peter, do you love me? Three times he asked him. He allowed Peter to assert his love as many times as he had denied him. Peter became the eminent apostle from among the original 12. His colossal failure did not preempt him from being greatly used to preach the good news of Christ. His anguished denial was overturned for great usefulness from that day forward.

It is no different with you and me. Do not listen to the devil when he whispers within your mind that you have crossed the line and might as well give up and shrink off into a corner somewhere and hang your head. No, no! If God could turn Peter around, he can turn you around as well. He did the same in the life of Paul when he took a persecutor of the church and turned him into the apostle to the Gentiles. It was Paul himself who gave us these important words from his own heart. In striving forward for the fulfillment of the hope of the gospel, he said, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14). Let us arise from our sinful setbacks and failures and do the same.

Conclusion

One of my all-time favorite movies is Chariots of Fire. One scene in particular inspires me. It is a moment when a scrappy little Scotsman is in a footrace. He is striving with all his might and heart. But in the course of the run, he is tripped and falls down. The motion of the film slows to a stop. Here is a defining moment. What will he do? It could be reasoned he might as well give up; there is no way he can win. But he doesn't. Yes, you think, he is good sport; he is going to finish the race

even though he will be the last to cross the finish line. And yet he jumps to his feet and runs even harder than he did before the fall. Straining forward with all his might, and undoubtedly a measure of divine assistance, the scrappy Scotsman Eric Liddell comes from behind to break the tape and cross the line in first place.

The next time your face is in your hands and your tears are streaming because of sin, let your joy be turned to sorrow. Cleanse your hands and purify your heart. Receive God's forgiveness, and arise in hope. Know that we all are very great sinners. But also know that Jesus is a very great savior. Your defining moment is not your sin. It is how you deal with being on the ground.

Prayer

Benediction

Now may Christ grant you the grace to be unashamed of him and of his gospel. And may he grant that when you fall, even when you go very low, that you will not wallow there but arise. Forgetting what lies behind, strain forward for the upward call of Christ. A-men.