

Mark: Failure

Mark 14:27-31

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Now we return this evening, once again to the Gospel of Mark, and we're in the close of the fourteenth chapter. That means we only have two more chapters left in Mark. Chapter fifteen, of course, will take us through the trial before Pontius Pilate, and especially the crucifixion of our Lord; and then in chapter sixteen we will see Mark's account of the resurrection.

But just to remind ourselves now of where we are, we skipped over a section a month or more ago in verses 27-31, the prediction of Peter's denial. And I did that deliberately because I want to take that little section and the closing verses of Mark 14 together. Mark has a wonderful habit (and once you've seen it, you see it all the time) of sandwiching various stories and wrapping them around with other stories. And he does that here with the Peter story: first of all the prediction, and then the very account of Peter's denial of Jesus.

Before I read the passage — this is one of those sections of Scripture that has perplexed me. I think ever since I first read these passages 35 or more years ago now. (I was an adult when I first read the Bible, you understand — a long story, won't go into it now. I wasn't brought up in a Christian home.)

But Mark tells us that Jesus' prediction is that before a rooster crows twice Peter will deny Him three times. And then the other Gospels mention not a two-fold crowing of the rooster, but only a single-fold crowing of the rooster. It may be one of those things that you pass over and never think about again, and now that I've mentioned it you wish I hadn't! But liberals and others have made a great deal of this. There have been all kinds of attempts to try and reconcile these accounts, and I have to say to you that none of them are terribly convincing to me, and that means that I don't know the answer to this, but I know that there is an answer, because I'm more convinced of the truthfulness and the inerrancy of the Bible than I am about the machinations of liberals in finding fault with the Bible. And that doesn't mean that my belief in the inerrancy of Scripture...it doesn't mean that I know all of the answers to every conceivable problem that there is. And this is one of those problems that I am still trying to sort out. I know you probably have your favorite reconciliation attempt, and you can tell me about it afterwards.

I'm probably aware of it. But I think it's important that sometimes when we read the Bible that there are problems and there are difficulties; but my belief in inerrancy does not rest on my ability to solve all of those problems. I believe the Bible is inerrant because Jesus did, and that's my fundamental basis of faith. I want to be where Jesus was in regard to the Scripture. It's the safest place to be.

Well, we're going to read these passages together, but before we do so, let's come together before God in prayer.

Father, we thank You now for this passage of Scripture. It immediately speaks to our hearts. We recognize as we read these words something of ourselves; that we identify with Peter, and therefore we pray tonight that by the work and illumination of Your Spirit You would so cause the meaning of these words of Scripture to be made clear to us, so that in reading them once again tonight You would so write them upon our hearts that they might indelibly shape and mold the very fabric of our discipleship. Bless us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We begin in Mark 14, and beginning at verse 27.

And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, because it is written, 'I will strike down the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times." But Peter kept saying insistently, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all were saying the same thing, also."

[And then in verse 66] — As Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Nazarene." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch, and a rooster crowed. The servant-girl saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" But again he denied it. And after a while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too." He began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" Immediately a rooster crowed a second time and Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he began to weep.

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now by any standard, I think, Peter remains one of the most colorful, identifiable, of all the disciples. I think I probably speak for most of you when I suggest that he is the one with whom we identify the most. He can be terribly goofy...speaking,

blurting out the first thing that comes in his head. And yet you have to admire his absolute sincerity even when he says it. Even when he says something that is utterly foolish, he's terribly sincere in saying it.

Peter is the disciple that shows all the warts. It's not an unrealistic portrayal of discipleship. It's a discipleship that is up and down. It's on the very heights, but it's also in the very valleys. He has good days and he has catastrophically bad days. He's a disciple who falls, and he falls more than once. And most of us, I think, as we reflect on our own discipleship, our own following of the Lord, can identify with Peter perhaps more than, say, the Apostle Paul.

Jesus has said to Peter at Caesarea Philippi, a turning point, a momentous occasion in the life and ministry of Jesus, when He had asked the question, you remember, "Who do men say that I am?" And some had said He was Elijah or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets, or even John the Baptist returned from the dead. And He had turned to the disciples and asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" And it was Peter who said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was a momentous display on Peter's part, a recognition of the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth, that He was the Christ, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament, the one of whom Genesis 3:15 had spoken, the one that the prophets had longed for and spoken about.

Back in John 6, remember, when Jesus had spoken about eating and drinking His flesh and blood, and that afterwards many abandoned Him, and Jesus asked the disciples, "Are you too going to abandon Me?" and you remember Peter's response, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." There's no one else that we can go to.

Peter was a disciple. He was a leader. He had found in Jesus of Nazareth everything, the answer to the problem of his sin and guilt; he found in Jesus the One who filled his life with meaning and purpose and direction. He committed his life to Christ. He had left everything and followed Him. He'd left a fishing business, a viable fishing business in Galilee, to follow Jesus wherever He went. He was ready to die for Him.

That's what he says here, isn't it? That though everyone else denies You, abandons You, forsakes You, I'm ready to die for You. And Peter meant it, I think. And he would die for Jesus, crucified outside the walls of the city of Rome; crucified upside down, according to tradition, at Peter's own request, because he didn't feel worthy to be identified with the crucifixion of Jesus.

"I will never deny You." Of course there's pride in this...self-confidence in this statement. It's an utterly unrealistic assessment of His weakness and the power of indwelling sin that lies within each one of our hearts; and he almost did it, because here all the other disciples had left. Perhaps John Mark is there somewhere - but the disciple who flees losing his clothes, he's at least still there,

even if he's lurking in the background.

I want to ask tonight, what is it that we are meant to learn from this story? Because I think we are meant to learn, you and I, some very, very significant things about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I. There are days when testing of our faith will be severe.

We learn first of all that there are days when testing, the testing of our faith, will be severe and insistent. There is what Paul calls “an evil day.” You remember in Ephesians 6 when he gives that admonition to put on the whole armor of God, so that in the evil day we might be enabled to stand. And I rather think, though there is some dispute...but I rather think that what Paul is referring to is not the evil day that is the Day of Judgment or some end time day, but a day that you and I have known, a day when the devil seems near; a day when nothing seems to go right; a day when you almost can taste the oppression of temptation bearing down upon you.

Jesus certainly knew that day in His own ministry when He was tempted in the wilderness. Job certainly knew that day, when on one day he loses all that he has, he loses all ten of his children. What a trial! What a testing of his faith. David had a day when instead of being in battle with his men, he's on the rooftop of his palace and spies Bathsheba...an evil day; a day of tempting, a day of trial, a day of testing.

And those whom God intends to use, He will try and He will test. Like a refiner's fire He will come to sweep away the dross, to make us aware of our native sinfulness, our native propensity to fall into sin, so that more and more we will learn to lean upon Christ and to lay hold of Him with both hands. There are days of testing, and days as here, when that testing comes in waves — in relentless waves — not just one, but two and three. This is a thoroughly realistic assessment of what discipleship means, because although we have been brought into union and communion with Jesus Christ, and we've been made heirs of the family of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ, though the old has passed away and the new has come, the sin still resides within; so that the good what we would, we do not, and the evil that we would not, that we find that we do; that the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary, one to the other. And Peter's learning that. He's learning something about who he is, who he really is. He's learning about the nature of the way in which we make promises to God that are based upon a reliance upon ourselves rather than an utter dependence on the sovereignty of God and the provisions of His Spirit.

There are days of testing, and sometimes those days are severe, and sometimes they're insistent. We are to be armed and we are to be ready, forewarned for

such days.

II. We should be realistic about our ability to withstand temptation.

Well, a second thing that we learn from this passage is that we need to be thoroughly realistic about our native ability to withstand temptation. Peter seems to have had an overwhelming confidence in his own native abilities...his ability to say 'no' when temptation knocked at the door. "I will never deny You." We all want to say that. We all instinctively want to say that. When Jesus comes and asks us tonight, we want to be able to say with Peter, "I will never deny You. That's my intention. I don't want ever to deny You."

But there's a principle here. It's the I Corinthians 10:12 principle: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall." "To take heed, lest he fall," and there's an awful reality, there's an awful truth...it's a truth that our *Confession of Faith*, for example, alludes to: that it's they who persevere to the end that shall be saved; that there's an absolute insistence in the New Testament that we need to persevere, we need to work out our own salvation with fear and with trembling. We need every day to cast ourselves upon the Lord and rely upon His strength, and commit ourselves to His promises. The Bible is littered with examples of Christians who fall, believers who fall: the drunkenness of Noah, for example; the lying of Abraham; the adultery of David; and they're like beacons that say if the mighty can fall, if Noah and Abraham and David and Peter can fall, and fall so tragically, and fall so publicly, surely, my friends, you and I can fall.

I've repeated it now a number of times, and I think Ligon is now repeating it along with me, but it's a friend of ours who once said — and it's a number of years ago he said it to me — that when he was a young man he wanted to finish in a blaze of glory, and now that he's 65 he just wants to finish without committing a horrible sin, because all around us are the strewn carcasses of professing Christians who have fallen, and fallen publicly and fallen catastrophically.

III. We need to be alert to how temptation comes.

There's something else we need to learn here: that there is often a progress to the way in which temptation comes. You know, temptation would be easy if it sent you an advance warning and said 'I'll be knocking on the door at five o'clock this evening, and I'll just come once, and you'd better be ready.' Wouldn't that be great? Temptation comes when you're tired. Temptation comes when you're at your wits' end. Temptation comes when you just didn't read your Bible that morning, when you haven't prayed, and had a row with somebody or other and you're in bad form. And then, to top it all, temptation comes knocking at the door and you're utterly defenseless.

This girl, this young girl — imagine Peter, Peter the rock, “Rocky” — “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church,” that’s what Jesus has said. And here is the mighty rock himself falling to the voice of a young girl, a young maiden.

And she’s seen him! She’s seen him in the company of the disciples. She’s seen him somewhere in Jerusalem, perhaps during this week when they’ve been making these forays into the temple area. And she’s seen him. She’s definitely seen him with the disciples, and says so. And he denies it. He categorically denies it. Denies understanding anything of what she’s talking about.

This is no white lie. This is a major, major blooper on Peter’s part. It’s a no-holds-barred, because if Peter was true to himself, not only was Peter out and out when it came to discipleship, but he was out and out when it came to sin, too. Peter didn’t go in for half sins; he went in for the full measure. And he moved away, perhaps out into the outer courtyard, and perhaps there’s a fire lit there. And in the glow of the fire, she follows him...insistent, you see. And you can imagine what’s going on in Peter’s head: “I wish this girl would go away!” And she says again, ‘You’re definitely one of them.’ and he denies it again. And then, after a while, and maybe now he’s been making conversation, or maybe his denials have come forth with that northern Galilean accent that stood out like a sore thumb in Jerusalem, and the bystanders a third time now, say ‘Surely, surely, you are one of them.’ And he denies it again.

The relentless pressure, the progress of temptation, and the spectacular fall is very public. Temptation comes like that. It’s not content simply to knock once; it comes again and again and again, wearing down your defenses.

IV. Temptation often strikes at our weakest point, our besetting sin.

But the fourth thing that we learn here: That temptation often strikes at our besetting sin. You know, Hebrews 12:1 and 2 speak about besetting sins: “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily beset us...” sins that we’re prone to committing. And what was that for Peter? Well, I think we’re given a little clue right at the very inception of Jesus’ call to Peter to be a disciple. His very opening words to Peter were, “Fear not. From henceforth you will catch men.”

Peter was prone to being afraid of what others thought about him. Do you remember in Galatians 2 (much later now, they’re in Jerusalem...Paul and Barnabas and Peter and others), and Paul and Peter and Barnabas, who have set out on missionary campaigns that have seen the blessing of God in drawing Gentiles into the faith...all of this is causing not a little suspicion by the mother church in Jerusalem.

And what happens when Peter gets back to Jerusalem? Because [Paul says] he

was afraid of what the men of Jerusalem would say about him if he sat down and ate at the same table with Gentiles, he decides to do the unthinkable and moves his food and his plate and his knife and fork or whatever it was he had, and moves to the table for Jews only. And Paul, you remember, stood him down publicly. And Paul there in Galatians 2 seems to give us a little insight into the besetting sin of the Apostle Peter, and it was the sin of being afraid of what others might say about you. It was his Achilles heel.

And temptation will often strike at our Achilles heel. You need to shore up that weakness in your life, whatever that weakness may be. You need to recognize it. How can you “lay aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset you” unless you know what that sin is? And most of us have an idea. Most of us know only too well what our besetting sins are. Most of us know all too well what the circumstances are that almost guarantee that we're going to fall, and we're going to sin. And here is Peter saying to us this evening ‘That's where temptation will strike. It will go for that jugular. It will go for that weak spot in your life.’

V. God's mercy abounds to His elect in spite of their sins.

But there's something else that we are to learn, and it's one of the most beautiful: that no amount of failure should force us to conclude that we must now live the rest of our lives experiencing only the second best.

It's hard to imagine a bigger and more public sin than the three-fold denial of Jesus in His hour of need. I don't think Peter ever forgot it. I doubt there was a day that Peter didn't think about it, and it didn't come back to him again. I can't imagine but that he would wake up at night and remember with haunting clarity that night in the courtyard, when, according to Luke's version, when he denied Him a third time. Jesus, from the vantage point of an upper room somewhere in the house of Caiaphas, actually locked eyes on Peter. Their eyes met.

On Tuesday, this coming Tuesday, March 21, in 1556, 450 years ago on Tuesday, Thomas Cranmer was martyred in Oxford. He was burned to the stake. Thomas Cranmer is the man who probably single-handedly wrote the 1549 and 1552 editions of *The Book of Common Prayer*. It's to Cranmer that we owe the language that we often repeat here in this very pulpit: “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.” They are Cranmer's words.

Cranmer wasn't the greatest scholar of his time, but he surrounded himself with those who were, and committed himself to the cause of the Reformation. Nicolas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, bishops both of them, had already been martyred - burnt in Oxford some four or five months before in the previous year. He had been imprisoned in February of 1556. The queen, Queen Mary, had already signed his death warrant, but seeking to halt the progress of the Reformation, had men come in to Cranmer day after day to see if he would sign a recantation

in the belief that he would be pardoned — which was never going to be the case.

Finally, on March 19, after some five weeks of this in a lonely cell in Oxford, with his right hand he finally signs a recantation. And like Peter he immediately breaks down and weeps. Two days later he was burnt at the stake. And this is J.C. Ryle's account, taken from observers of the scene in the sixteenth century:

“Then he was bound to the stake with a steel band around his waist, and the fire was kindled at his feet. The fire lept up, but he stretched out his arm and held his right hand in the flame, and there he held it without flinching, except that once it was withdrawn to wipe his face, until it had burnt to a stump, while he cried out the while, ‘This hand hath offended!’”

It was the hand that he had signed that recantation with. It's an astonishing story, 450 years ago on Tuesday. God uses the Cranmers and the Peters of this world who have instinctive, native weaknesses, who in moments of temptation and crisis fall away to their weakness.

What's the difference between Peter and Judas? What's the difference between Peter and Judas? The difference, my friends, is that Peter repents. Peter breaks down with tears of repentance and seeks the pardon and mercy and forgiveness of his Savior. And, you know, the beautiful thing about this story is that Jesus wrapped His arms around Peter, forgave him his sin, sent him forth again. This is the Peter who, on the Day of Pentecost six weeks from now, will be preaching that astonishing sermon in boldness and in courage in this very city on behalf of his Savior. This is the man who ultimately will die for Jesus, who will bear the cross and bear it to his death, crucified upside down outside the city of Rome.

You see, my friends, spiritual growth comes often in fits and starts for most of us. Oh, there are those shining lights that seem to just spurt on ahead and all you see is a blaze of glory. And there are people like that. There aren't many, I think, but there are people like that. But I imagine most of us tonight identify with Peter; yet, by the grace of God, we've had astonishing triumphs, and it's all by the grace of God. But we have had our days, too, when we have fallen. We've fallen into sin, and fallen into serious sin. But God is a God of grace, and He's a God of mercy, and He's a God of compassion, and He hears the cries of the penitent and sees the tears of the penitent and forgives and sends them out again.

This is a story as much about the discipleship of Peter as it is about the grace of God in the gospel. Ah, what marvelous grace it is to those of us tonight who know all too well how easily we fall.

Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You once again for this very familiar story that strikes such a resonant chord within our own hearts. We, too, have known days

when our desire to follow You has fallen prey to our native residual fear, a fear of men and fear of being different from the world; a fear of pain, a fear of what it might mean to be deprived of something. Our Father, we pray tonight that You would from this very story help us to be on our guard. Help us to put on the whole armor of God, that in an evil day we might be enabled to stand. We want to be able to stand tonight. We want to be able to stand tomorrow if temptation comes; so help us, we pray, to have short accounts with You; to always remember that unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it. And hear us and bless us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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