

3. The weakness of Peter

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[0 : 00] Our gracious, wonderful God, as we sing these words about taking up the cross, we remember that this is exactly what your Son himself did for us because he was determined to follow through his purpose and your purpose to bring salvation.

And we pray that you will indeed give us grace as we seek to follow the Lord Jesus, to take up our cross also in our own turn, to be prepared to sacrifice much, to deny ourselves and to look to heaven.

We thank you so much for the grace and the power and presence of your Holy Spirit whom you have promised to us. And dear Father, as we pray today, we are conscious that there is turmoil and upheaval in the world around us.

There always is, but we are very conscious at the moment of turmoil in the Middle East and in North Africa as various nations somehow seem wanting together to challenge their governments and to want to throw off rulers whom they perceive to be too harsh and to be ruling not in the best interests of their own people.

And we think of the people of Iran and Bahrain and Libya as we hear just today of turmoil in Benghazi in the north of Libya. We think too of the people of Egypt and the people of Tunisia.

[1 : 39] It's hard for us, dear Father, to know quite what to make of all this, but we are so grateful that you are the one who raised up regimes and also the one who puts them down.

And we know that all history is in your hand. And so we ask you, dear Father, through these upheavals and whatever they may lead to in the coming weeks and months, to be working your purposes out as you prepare for your kingdom fully and finally to come in.

Our prayer is especially that you will strengthen and nerve your people, the Christian church, in those countries and enable them to take up their cross and to bear witness to the truth of the gospel and that many should turn from other gods and no gods to worship the one who is alone true, you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

So we ask you to look mercifully upon the world and to hasten the turning of many people to Christ.

And we pray that you'll keep us faithful in our own prayers and our own witness to this end.

And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, friends, perhaps you turn with me to John.

[3 : 03] We shan't actually go to John 18 for a couple of minutes. I'd like us to start in John 13, please, because there's a little passage there which is necessary background reading to what John has to say about Peter in chapter 18.

So John 13, which you'll find on page 900 in our Visitor's Bibles, 900. And I want to read the final paragraph there, verses 36 to 38, where Jesus foretells Peter's denial.

So John chapter 13, verse 36. Simon Peter said to Jesus, Lord, where are you going? Jesus answered him, where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.

Peter said to him, Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. Jesus answered, will you lay down your life for me?

Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times. Now it's interesting that in all four of the Gospels, we have the record of Peter denying that he knew Jesus.

[4 : 18] And it's also true that in all four Gospels, we have the four evangelists recording Jesus' prediction of the denial that Peter would make. So let's turn on now to John chapter 18 and verse 12.

And I want us to read in a moment the way in which John records Peter's denials, three denials of Jesus in chapter 18. And let's notice how John weaves his account of Peter's denials in with the account of Jesus being questioned by the high priests.

If we ask why John puts these two episodes together, and if you look at chapter 18, you'll see Jesus before the high priest is dealt with in verses 12 to 14, and again verses 19 to 24.

But Peter's denials are verses 15 to 18, and then again verses 25 to 27. If we ask why did John decide to weave these two stories together, I think there are perhaps two answers.

First, simply that they were taking place at exactly the same time. So it was while Jesus was inside the high priest's house being questioned by Annas the high priest, at that same moment Peter was outside in the courtyard being questioned by various people out there and denying Jesus.

[5 : 33] But secondly, I wonder if John puts it like this to show us what a very great contrast there is between Jesus and Peter. There is Jesus inside the house facing his questioners calmly, and he denies nothing.

Whereas Peter outside in the courtyard faces his questioners and shrinks from them and he denies everything. In other words, isn't John showing the great difference between the fearless teacher and his fearful disciple?

So let me read now verses 12 to 27 in chapter 18. So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

First they led him to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year. It was Caiaphas who had advised the Jews that it would be expedient that one man should die for the people.

Simon Peter followed Jesus and so did another disciple. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he entered with Jesus into the court of the high priest.

[6 : 44] but Peter stood outside at the door. So the other disciple who was known to the high priest went out and spoke to the servant girl who kept watch at the door and brought Peter in.

The servant girl at the door said to Peter, you also are not one of this man's disciples, are you? He said, I'm not. Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire because it was cold and they were standing and warming themselves.

Peter also was with them standing and warming himself. The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, I have spoken openly to the world. I've always taught in synagogues and in the temple where all Jews come together. I've said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them.

They know what I said. When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand saying, Is that how you answer the high priest?

[7 : 53] Jesus answered him, If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong. But if what I said is right, why do you strike me? Annas then sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. So they said to him, You also are not one of his disciples, are you? He denied it and said, I'm not.

One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, Did I not see you in the garden with him?

Peter again denied it and at once a rooster crowed. Well let me first point out something rather remarkable about all this.

Let's think history just for a moment. It's generally thought that Peter was martyred by the Romans at much the same time that Paul was martyred, perhaps somewhere around 65 or 66 AD, towards the end of the reign of Emperor Nero, who was persecuting the Christians at that time.

[9 : 08] But John almost certainly lived on very much longer and the writing of his gospel is normally dated to somewhere between the year 80 and the year 90 when he would have been a very old man.

So when John set down this account of Peter's denials, Peter himself would have been long dead. But Peter was still very much alive when Matthew, Mark and Luke were writing their gospels.

In fact, Mark is thought to have been a very close associate of Peter's, perhaps even his secretary. And that would mean in a sense that Peter's fingerprints were all over Mark's gospel, if I can put it like that.

Now if I had been Peter, I think I'd have been rather embarrassed, very embarrassed, to have this incident published all over the Mediterranean world. I think I might have been tempted to have a quiet word in the ears of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

And John, too, if I'd suspected that 20 years down the line he was going to write all this up as well. I think I would have said to the evangelists, come on, brothers, I'm one of the most senior apostles,

aren't I?

[10:12] I'm one of the best known leaders of the Christian church. Wouldn't it be a bit rough on my reputation if that story of what I said that night got out? I mean, it was something and nothing.

It was all over in five minutes, and it happened a long time ago. Surely it's not going to help the progress of the gospel very much if a big fish like me is not presented to the world squeaky clean. Now, that's not how things worked out, as we know, because all four evangelists included their account of Peter's cowardice. As I said a moment ago, they all also include the account of Jesus predicting to Peter that he was going to deny Jesus.

And that, you might say, puts Peter in an even worse light, because then the reader can say, Peter wasn't simply caught off guard, unprepared. He'd been warned by Jesus, and he should have been all the more watchful.

But he behaved so weakly, even after Jesus had warned him. Is this Christian church led by wimps? Now, the four evangelists did not draw a veil over Peter's cowardice.

[11:21] Peter, as far as we know, made no attempt at all to suppress this information about himself. So I think we can say that all this speaks of the honesty. The honesty, not only of the early Christian leaders, but of the Christian faith itself.

The Bible is so utterly and refreshingly truthful. It never reads like propaganda. As you read the Bible, you never smell a rat. You never catch a whiff of deceitfulness.

You never get the uncomfortable feeling that people are being cosmetically enhanced, if you like, having their characters airbrushed, presented as being nobler or more virtuous than they really were.

And this is very encouraging for us because it helps us to trust the truthfulness of the record. And I think also it's a great relief to us to know these things because if Peter, Peter behaved like this and was forgiven and was restored by Jesus, then surely we can dare to believe that we will be similarly treated with mercy by the Lord Jesus if we behave like this.

Well, let me try and draw out two lessons from the incident. First of all, there's the challenge to be bold and then secondly, there's a great lesson about the grace of restoration.

[12:39] So first of all, there's a challenge to us here to be bold. Peter, I think, would have said to the four evangelists, publish it, brothers, publish it, because there's a lesson for many people not to act as I did.

So let's pick up the story at verse 15 here. Simon Peter, says John, followed Jesus and so did another disciple. Now this other disciple is thought usually to be John himself.

And verse 15 goes on to say that this other disciple was known to the high priest and that's why he was permitted to enter the court or the courtyard of the high priest's house.

You can imagine, I think, a fairly large house and there would have been a walled courtyard with a gate or a door to let people in. So the servant girl who was on duty at the gate recognised John, presumably because John was a regular comer and goer at that house.

So she asked him to come in. Peter, however, was not known at the high priest's house, so he was initially kept outside. But verse 16 tells us that when John noticed that Peter had not been admitted, admitted he left Jesus, who went on to be with the high priest, and he went back to the servant girl at the gate, had a word with her and arranged for Peter to be admitted.

[13:58] And as Peter came in through the gate, the girl looked at him and said, you're not one of this man's disciples too, are you? And Peter said, I'm not. Probably a bit like that.

I'm not. I'm not. Now, it was a cold night, as verse 18 tells us. So they kindled a charcoal fire and that was burning there out of doors in the courtyard.

And Peter, presumably keeping as low a profile as he possibly could, crept up to the fire with the others so as to warm himself. There might have been a dozen people or so standing around the fire. Now, John picks up the story again with Peter warming himself in verse 25.

And this time, some of the people who are standing there by the fire with Peter ask him the very same question that the girl had asked him before. And Peter gives the same answer.

I'm not. It's easier to say no the second time, isn't it? He'd set himself a precedent. So he said it the second time, I'm not. Then at verse 26, you sense that the pressure begins to get more intense.

[15:05] Do you remember how back in verse 10, Peter had impetuously drawn his sword in the garden of Gethsemane and he'd struck out at one of the high priest's servants and had slashed off his ear. The man was called Malchus.

And here in verse 26, a relative of Malchus, another man who had been in the garden of Gethsemane with Malchus, looked at Peter and recognised him. Perhaps even remembered that he was the one who'd cut off his relative's ear.

And he said, and I guess there was some needle here, he said, didn't I see you in the garden with him? He might even have meant, aren't you the wretch that cut off my cousin's ear? And Peter said, well, John just tells us in verse 27 that Peter denied it.

But if you read Matthew's account at this point, Matthew tells us that on this third occasion, Peter began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, I do not know the man. In other words, he strengthened his denial of Jesus with an oath of some kind.

He used strong language. And then, a cock crowed. And Luke tells us that when Peter heard the cock crowing, he remembered what Jesus had said, and he went out, out of the courtyard, out into the lane, into the quietness, away from the other people, and he broke down and wept.

[16:24] So why was it that this man, Simon Peter, who had been with Jesus in public, publicly known as one of his chief friends and disciples, why was it that he now lost his nerve at this point and denied all knowledge of Jesus?

The answer, of course, is that he was afraid. It's not that Jesus had received no opposition during those three years of his public ministry. He'd received quite a bit of opposition.

He'd been insulted and rejected by a lot of people already. But he'd also been very popular with the large crowds who had welcomed him at his teaching and his healing and who flocked around him literally in their thousands.

But when it comes to this dreadful final Thursday evening, the hostility had suddenly stepped up to an altogether new level. Jesus was now arrested, for the first time that had happened, and he was tied up with ropes.

He was in the high priest's house at this very moment being interrogated. There was a smell of death in the air. There was a smell of violence and wickedness. And Peter knew that if Jesus was being horribly treated, it was more than likely that any of his close associates could end up with the same treatment themselves.

[17:39] So his courage suddenly forsook him and he sought to save his skin. His only concern, suddenly, was to survive.

Well, what is the lesson for us, for Christians today? Isn't it this, that the moment, the times when we are in real danger of denying Jesus, if we're Christian people, the times when we're in worse danger, is the time when Jesus is being attacked and vilified at some place very close to where we are.

If you're a Christian, you're never going to deny Jesus when you're in church on a Sunday with your own congregation, are you? If everybody around you is singing his praises and honouring him in their words and their worship, of course, it's easier for you to honour him as well.

It's when you suddenly find yourself in a place where people are attacking him, that's when the pressure is on you to keep quiet and not to acknowledge him or even to say that you don't know him.

For example, here's the kind of situation that any of us might find ourselves in. You're travelling by train. We're great train travellers in Glasgow, aren't we? I've used more trains the last few years since I've been in Scotland than I've used in the whole of my life before.

[18:56] You're on typical first Scot Rail train, one of those little tables with four seats, two on that side and two on the other. You know what I'm talking about? So you're in one seat and there are three other people who are obviously friends and acquaintances in the other three seats.

And as these three talk together you hear that they begin to speak very roughly and fiercely about Jesus. Not about the church, not about religion, but about Jesus.

Horrible things about him. Now what do you do? Do you pick up your newspaper and bury your nose in it and say nothing? Or do you possibly lower your newspaper and say something like this? Excuse me friends, I'd like to say a word. You're speaking very strongly against Jesus and many people have done that for many years. But for myself I believe that he's the son of God, the most wonderful human being who's ever existed.

And to me he's my saviour, my friend. Now friends, I have never, that's an imaginary situation, I've never actually been sitting in that seat saying those words.

[20:04] And perhaps you never have either. Some of you will have been in very similar situations I'm sure. But it's worth thinking about what you and I might say if we're suddenly in that kind of

position.

One of the reasons why the evangelists have recorded Peter's denial in all four Gospels is to help Christian people to be prepared. If you or I were ever to deny, as Peter did, that we know Jesus, the reason would be fear.

That instinctive impulse for self-preservation. Fear that if we spoke up for him we might be hated or despised or even perhaps have violence done to us. Let me make a very practical suggestion.

That perhaps during the next 24 hours, while this is still fresh in your memory, you take a pen and paper, you sit down at your table at home quietly for 10 minutes or so, and you write out a few sentences, a few things that you could say in support of Jesus if you were ever suddenly put under pressure to deny him.

Sentences like this. You may hate Jesus, but I love him, and many others do as well. Or how about this. You may write Jesus off as a fraud, but I think there are very good reasons for believing that he really is God incarnate.

[21 : 24] Now you can think of other things, better things to say than that, but why not sit down in this next 24 hours and write out a few sentences of that kind so as to prepare yourself for that sort of situation.

Think through the things you might say, and then pray for courage that you actually would say them if suddenly you find yourself in the pressure cooker. So there's the first thing for us, the challenge to be bold.

It's part of taking up your cross, isn't it? Sitting loose to people's opinion. Well now secondly, let's think about the grace of restoration. This surely was the other main reason why Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record this incident.

They want people to know how Peter was restored. Again, think back to the first century when the Gospels were written. Anybody living in the Roman Empire who was at all in touch with politics and public life and the things people were talking about, they would all have known the name of Simon Peter.

Because Peter, along with Paul and John and James, the Lord's brother, they were known to be the senior leaders of the Christian church. And bear in mind that as the first century developed, there came wave upon wave of persecution against the Christians.

[22 : 41] Some of these persecutions arose from within Judaism and others, especially as the century went on, arose from the Gentile leadership of the Roman Empire. Paul, for example, knew what it was to be persecuted by Jews and by Gentiles.

And because of all this persecution, many Christians in the first century would have known keenly this pressure to keep quiet about their allegiance to Jesus.

Do you remember how Paul wrote to Timothy, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, in other words, of the gospel. Paul knew that Timothy, Timothy was a senior and experienced leader, but Paul knew he'd find himself in situations where he would be tempted to take the self-preservation route and say nothing or even deny that he was a Christian at all.

And I think we can be sure that there were many Christian people in the first century who did at times deny that they knew the Lord Jesus and followed him.

Frailty is our middle name. And Matthew, Mark, Luke and John knew that Christians sometimes lost their nerve and denied their knowledge of Jesus. And that is one reason why they make it so clear that Peter was forgiven and restored after this moment of cowardice.

[24 : 00] You'll perhaps know that John gives the fullest account of Peter's restoration in the final chapter of this gospel in chapter 21. But the other evangelists make clear hints as well.

So, for example, Mark says this in his chapter 16, which is the last chapter of Mark, where Mark tells of Jesus' resurrection on the Sunday morning. Mark says, the angel at the empty tomb said to the frightened women, go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before you to Galilee.

There you will see him. Go and tell his disciples and don't forget Peter. You see the way that he's included in the angel's message. Or think of Jesus' own words to Peter in Luke chapter 22.

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, all of you, that he might sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you, you Simon, that your faith may not fail.

And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. When you have turned again. Now those words were spoken before it even happened.

[25 : 12] Jesus knew Peter's character like he knew the back of his own hand. He knew that Peter's nerve would fail at the crucial moment. And yet Jesus also knew that Peter would turn again and then be able to strengthen his brothers and lead them.

So his lapse is not going to leave him permanently weakened. And let's remember also how very quickly Peter was restored. In John chapter 21, just two or three weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus, you remember, walks Peter along the shore of the sea.

And he asks him, Simon, do you love me? He asks him three times, doesn't he? Do you love me? And he recommissions him. Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs.

Pastor the flock of God. Peter didn't have to do 20 years' penance and wear a hair shirt and get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and have a cold bath for 20 years, did he?

The crowing of the cock was quite enough to make him realize what he'd done and to weep for it.

He was quickly restored and he was told to get on with the job of looking after Christ's people.

[26 : 20] So friends, let's take home this double lesson with us today. First of all, this lesson in courage and boldness. What does it matter in the end if people say nasty things to us and against us or think nasty things about us?

It is in fact an honor to be slighted and even insulted and reviled because of our allegiance to Jesus. Because it shows that we value his opinion more than we value the opinions of other people.

So there's the first lesson, courage and boldness. But also let's take with us this lesson of how gracious he is and how willing he is to restore to useful service those who have denied him in some way.

Some of us may have denied him in the way that Peter did, with an outright disowning of him.

Others of us may not have denied him quite like that and yet we've perhaps been silent when we should have spoken.

And the reason for our silence is that we have been too fond of other people's good opinion of us. We've wanted them to think well of us. We haven't wanted them to look down their noses at us and to write us off as simple gospel people.

[27 : 32] Simpletons. Fools. Well let's trust our Lord Jesus' willingness to restore us fully and quickly as he did for Peter. He knows our hearts.

He knows the heart of the person who wants to serve him. So just think of what happened. Peter denied Jesus. He wept.

He was restored. And then he got on with the task of serving the Lord and the gospel. That's the pattern. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, our Master, how we thank you for your gracious concern for Peter and the way that you so lovingly restored him and forgave him and then immediately gave him his work to do to look after the flock to tend the lambs.

Thank you so much that you are merciful to us as well because without your mercy we couldn't even begin. We need it. And our prayer, dear Lord Jesus, is that you will help us to take up our cross to become more and more unafraid and unashamed as our lives go on.

[28 : 53] Help us to speak boldly and courteously, courageously for you. To commend you by our words as well as our lives. And our prayer is that our lives may become ever more fruitful in the cause of the gospel.

And we ask it for your dear name's sake. Amen. Amen.