

# The Place Where Courage Fails

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[ 0 : 01 ]     Good, well let's turn now to our Bible reading. We're continuing in this series on John's Gospel chapters 18 and 19. So if you'd like to turn to John chapter 18 with me, you'll find it on page 904 in the big hardback Bibles if you'd like to follow there, page 904.

Last week we were looking at the high priests and their hostile questioning of Jesus and what it led to. And this week we're looking at Peter's denial of Jesus and the two accounts are woven in together.

So I'll read again as we had last week, John chapter 18 verses 12 to 27. 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 priesthood. 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.

[ 1 : 21 ]     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, 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've spoken openly to the world.

I've always taught in synagogues and at the temple where all Jews come together. I have 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?

[ 2 : 31 ]     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 am 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. Amen. Amen. Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing to us today.

Well, can we turn again in our Bibles to John's Gospel, chapter 18, page 904 in the big hardback Bibles.

[ 3 : 44 ] And my title for this morning is The Place Where Courage Fails.

We're going to look at Simon Peter. We're going to look at what he said, what he did when his courage was put to the test and failed him. I wonder what you make of the virtue of courage.

My impression is that it's not very much talked about these days in discussions about the formation of character in young people. If you've been to a speech day recently at a school or perhaps a graduation ceremony at a university, you'll have listened, I'm sure, to the guest speaker.

There's much talk in that kind of speech about ability, brilliance and success, taking opportunities, fulfilling a young person's potential, making a useful contribution to society.

But not much, in my experience, is said these days about courage, perhaps because the need for courage is not very much felt these days.

[ 4 : 57 ] Now, it was certainly felt in the aftermath of the Second World War because people knew how much it was needed then and much demonstrated, not only by great leaders like Winston Churchill, but by countless ordinary folk in Britain who endured hardship patiently and, of course, by many in the armed forces.

But in today's world, the mood is very different. There's a powerful trend in society to stifle strongly held views for fear of offending people.

So, for example, you're well aware of this, but university authorities, many universities, are nervous about the existence of Christian unions because Christian students might be so bold as to say that Islam and Hinduism are false faiths, or they might be so insensitive as to say that marriage is only for a man and a woman.

This desire to curb freedom of speech is born of fear, and people are being persuaded to think that there is no longer any place for frank and open and robust debate between people who hold opposing views about things.

So, if you say calmly that Islam is wrong in its teaching about God, you run the risk of being branded as Islamophobic. If you say calmly that same-sex marriage is a false idea, you may well be called homophobic.

[ 6 : 25 ] Often, our political leaders are giving way to these fears today, and people are frightened to say what they really think. But it is possible to think that Islam is false, and yet to love your Muslim-next-door neighbors and to share the gospel with them.

It is possible to think that same-sex marriage is a deeply mistaken idea, and yet to love the gay couple who live next door to you and to seek to bring the gospel to them.

Courage is not much talked about because courage is rooted in the idea that there is truth and there is falsehood, and that truth is worth defending.

But in a society where everybody's position has become acceptable and everybody's behavior is permissible, there is no longer much to stand for and no longer much to stand against, and therefore courage is not required.

Courage presupposes an underlying distinction between truth and falsehood. Now, the Bible is full of that underlying distinction between truth and falsehood, and therefore it's full of examples of courage, where individuals are prepared to take great personal risks in order to obey the Lord.

[ 7 : 41 ] Let me remind you of one or two. Moses showed great courage in the face of Pharaoh, as Pharaoh tried to prohibit the Israelites from leaving Egypt. Daniel and his friends, very young men, probably teenagers, showed extraordinary courage when they were under great pressure from the Babylonian regime.

Queen Esther was wonderfully courageous. If I perish, I perish, she said, showing a Christ-like willingness to lay down her life in order to save her people from a wicked persecutor.

Stephen, in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 7, showed extraordinary courage. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that his face was like an angel's, but his heart was like a lion's as he spoke to the Sanhedrin before being bundled out to be executed by stoning.

All of which makes Simon Peter's failure of courage the more striking, when he three times denies that he knows Jesus. But Matthew and Mark and Luke and John, all four of them, emphasize this episode very strongly.

All four of them record not only Peter's denials of Jesus, but Jesus' prediction to Peter that before the coming night is out, before cock crow, he is going to deny him three times.

[ 9 : 01 ] So let's turn to this passage in John, chapter 18. And you'll see that John weaves his account of Jesus being questioned by the high priests in with his account of Peter denying that he knows Jesus.

Now, if we ask, why does John weave these two episodes together? The answer is first that they were taking place simultaneously. It was while Jesus was inside the high priest's house being questioned that Peter was outside in the courtyard denying Jesus.

But secondly, isn't John pointing out a great contrast here? There is Jesus inside the house facing his questioners calmly, and he denies nothing.

Whereas Peter, standing outside, shrinks from his questioners, and he denies everything. John is showing us the great difference between the fearless teacher and his fearful disciple.

You see it again in a slightly different way. If you contrast what Jesus says in verse 5 with what Peter says in verse 17. In verse 5, Jesus says, I am he.

[ 10 : 08 ] Literally, he says, I am. In verse 17, Peter says, I am not. So why do John and Matthew and Mark and Luke, why do they emphasize this sorry episode in Peter's life so strongly?

Well, let's think for a moment of dates and history in the first century AD. It's generally thought that Peter was martyred in Rome at much the same time as Paul was martyred in about 65 AD, when Nero was the Roman emperor.

But John lived much longer, and he wrote his gospel much later, in about 80 or even 90 AD, when he would have been an old man. So when John set down his 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. In fact, Mark is thought to have been a close associate of Peter, perhaps his secretary, which would mean that Peter's fingerprints were all over Mark's gospel, if I can put it like that, that Mark was really reflecting Peter's own personal eyewitness reminiscences of the story of Jesus.

Now, if I had been Peter, I think I would have been pretty embarrassed to have this incident published all over the Mediterranean. I would have been tempted to have a quiet word in the ears of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and John as well, if I suspected that he might write a gospel in his old age.

[ 11 : 35 ] I think I would have said to them, come on, brothers, consider the situation. I'm one of the most senior apostles. I'm one of the best known of the leaders of the Lord's people. Wouldn't it be a bit tough on my reputation if that story got out?

Yes, I don't deny it happened, but it was all over in five minutes, and it happened a long time ago. Isn't it going to help the progress of the gospel if a big fish like me is presented to the world squeaky clean?

Now, that's not what happened, is it? All four evangelists included this account of Peter's cowardice, and as I said a moment ago, they all included Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial, and that puts Peter in an even worse light because the reader can't say, poor Peter was caught off guard.

Let's cut him a bit of slack. No, he'd been clearly forewarned, so he should have been all the more watchful, but he behaved so weakly even after Jesus had warned him.

The early gospel readers might have asked the question, is this Christian church being led by wimps? But the hard fact is that the four evangelists did not draw a veil over Peter's cowardice, and we can be sure that Peter himself made no attempt to suppress the incident.

[ 12 : 58 ] Doesn't this speak, then, of the honesty not only of the first Christian leaders, but of Christianity itself? The Bible is so utterly refreshingly truthful.

It never reads like propaganda. As you read it, you never smell a rat. You never catch a whiff of deceitfulness. You never get the uncomfortable feeling that people are being cosmetically enhanced, presented as being nobler or more virtuous than they really are.

And this is very encouraging for us. It helps us to trust the truthfulness of the record, the honesty of it, and it gives us a great sense of relief, because if Peter behaved like this and was then forgiven and restored by Jesus, we can dare to believe that Jesus would be similarly merciful to us when our courage fails.

Well, let me try to draw out two lessons from this episode. First, there's the challenge to be bold, but second, there's a great lesson about the grace of restoration.

First, then, there's this challenge to be bold, bold about our allegiance to Jesus. Peter surely said to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, publish it, brothers, publish it. Let the world know that I chickened out, because there's a lesson for others not to be as I was.

[ 14 : 21 ] Well, let's pick up the story at verse 15. Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple. Now, this other disciple is usually thought to be John himself.

And the verse goes on to say that the other disciple was known to the high priest, and that's why he was allowed into the court or courtyard of the high priest's house. There was a servant girl on duty at the gate, and she recognized John.

Well, presumably, he'd been there a number of times before, 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 says that when John saw that Peter had not been allowed in, he left Jesus with Annas, the high priest, and he went back to the door.

He had a word with the servant girl and arranged for Peter to be admitted. And, verse 17, as Peter came in, the girl looked at him and said, you're not one of this man's disciples, are you?

[ 15 : 28 ] She was probably about 15 or 16, a bit like the little waitress who serves you at Pizza Hut and comes to you halfway through your dinner and says, is everything all right for you, sir? But this big fisherman, with the strong hands and the broad shoulders, he drops his eyes before her and he says, I'm not.

There it was. The words are said. The denial is made. I'm not. I'm not one of his disciples. Now, verse 18 tells us it was a cold night.

I think it can be fairly chilly in Israel in early April, in the evening. And somebody had made a charcoal fire, so everybody got around the fire burning in the courtyard. And Peter, presumably keeping as low a profile as possible, gets close to the fire so as to warm himself.

Then John picks up the story again at verse 25. This time, one or two people standing by the fire ask him the very same question as the girl had asked him.

And Peter gives the very same answer. I am not. And then at verse 26, the pressure intensifies. You'll remember how, back in verse 10, Peter had impetuously drawn a sword and he'd cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, Malchus.

[16:50] And here in verse 26, a relative of Malchus, who'd been in the garden of Gethsemane with Malchus, looked at Peter and recognized him. Perhaps remember that he was the very one who'd cut off the ear.

And he said, didn't I see you in the garden with him? Perhaps implying, and aren't you the wretch that cut my cousin's ear off? And Peter said, well, John just tells us in verse 27 that Peter denied it.

But 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 with an oath of some kind.

He resorted to strong language. And then, a cock crowed. And Luke tells us that when Peter heard the cock crow, Peter went out, out of the courtyard, away from the other people, and he broke down and wept.

So the question is, why? Why did Peter, who for three years had been with Jesus in full public view, publicly associating himself with Jesus, known to many people as one of Jesus' disciples, why did he now lose his nerve and deny all knowledge of Jesus?

[18:09] The answer, of course, is that he was afraid. Jesus had been opposed during those three years of his public life, especially by the Jewish establishment, but he'd also been much welcomed and much applauded by the crowds.

especially when he was healing people. He'd had a very mixed reception up to now, but there had been a lot of support and encouragement. But now, on this dreadful Thursday evening, the atmosphere had changed.

The hostility was ratcheted right up. Jesus was now arrested. He was tied up with ropes. He was in the high priest's house being interrogated.

There was a smell of death in the air, a smell of violence and wickedness. And Peter knew that if Jesus was being horribly treated, any of his close associates might be dealt with similarly.

So his courage suddenly forsook him and he sought to save his skin. Suddenly, his only concern was to survive. Now, what is the lesson for Christians today?

[19:15] Isn't it this, that the moment we're in real danger of denying Jesus is the moment when Jesus is being attacked and vilified at some place very close to us?

If you're a Christian, you're not going to deny Jesus when you're in church on a Sunday. It's easy for us to honor Jesus when everybody around you is honoring 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 perhaps to say that you don't know him. That's the place where Peter found himself. And the Lord God has caused this account of Peter's weakness to be in the Bible because the Lord wants to teach us to be bold.

Now, it would be rash of us to be unsympathetic towards Peter. The Lord surely wants us to see our own potential behavior in Peter's example. Just imagine the kind of situation that anybody, any of us could find ourselves in.

You're traveling by train, Scotrail train, and you're sitting at one of those little tables, those foursomes on one side of the aisle, two people this side and two people on the other side. And imagine that you're in one seat and the other three seats are occupied by three people who are clearly traveling together and who know each other.

[ 20 : 39 ] And they start speaking very roughly and contemptuously about Jesus. Not about the church, not about religion, but about Jesus.

Now, what do you do? Do you bury yourself in your newspaper? Or do you gently say, excuse me, friends, but I must have a word. You're speaking very strongly against Jesus.

Many people have done that over many years. But for myself, I believe that he's the son of God, that he's the most wonderful human being of all time. I regard him as my best friend and my savior.

He's my reason for living. Now, I've never been in quite that position and perhaps you haven't either. But it's worth thinking about what you might say in that position.

This episode in the Gospels is written down to help us to be prepared. If you or I were ever to deny that we knew Jesus, the reason would be fear, the 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.

[ 21 : 52 ] When I was growing up, the Christian faith was much more widely respected in Britain than it is today. And if back then you confessed to being a Christian, people might regard you as being rather keen or rather old-fashioned but pretty harmless.

But today it's much more difficult for young people who are Christians. They tend to get branded as extremist or thoroughly weird. If, for example, they express approval of Christian sexual ethics, they tend to be regarded as occupying the low moral ground, not the high moral ground.

Let me quote you verbatim the words of an 18-year-old student as he was starting out at university last autumn. He was a Christian. He'd come away from home but he wanted to keep quiet about it.

He was a bit shy. He said this, Just for the sake of getting on with people on a day-to-day basis, I try to remain as neutral as possible. There's a reason why 95% of my conversation is about clubbing and football.

It's neutral, it's harmless, and it doesn't put people off. Now, I'm not unsympathetic to that young student. I'm sure I was like that myself as a youngster.

[ 23 : 10 ] But one of the purposes of a church, one of the purposes of a congregation, is for us to help each other, to teach each other, to be bold and unashamed of Jesus. This is reflected in many of our songs and hymns.

Think of stand up, stand up for Jesus. That includes the line, Let courage rise with danger. So danger is building up, let courage rise to meet it.

Many of the hymns we sing are full of encouragement to be bold and to grow bolder. Soldiers of Christ, arise and put your armor on. Charles Wesley.

Fight the good fight with all your might. Christ is your strength and Christ your right. Many of our hymns are addressed to the Lord God or to Jesus or the Holy Spirit. That one's not.

That one is addressed to each other, isn't it? It's an encouragement to others. Fight the good fight. Let us fight the good fight with all our might. How about this one? Then fancies flee away.

[ 24 : 09 ] I'll fear not what men say. I'll labor night and day to be a pilgrim. Written by John Bunyan. Locked up for 12 years in 17th century England for daring to preach the gospel in places where he was not licensed to preach it.

A church, a congregation, can develop a culture of boldness, a culture of not being afraid to confess Christ. A university Christian union can do exactly the same thing.

So let's encourage each other in our conversations to be bold, not shrill, not hysterical, not aggressive, but unafraid to confess our allegiance to Jesus.

Jesus. It's surely for this reason that Peter didn't veto the inclusion of this episode in the Gospels. Peter's example here is eloquent. He is saying to us, don't be like me.

Let's always bear in mind as well the element of romance in the Christian life. To be a Christian is to be involved in the most wonderful romance. It is a love affair.

[ 25 : 18 ] There's a deep joy bubbling away at the heart of Christ's bride, which is us, as we wait for the great wedding feast. A girl who is waiting to get married is not ashamed to tell people that she loves her fiancé.

Listen to what Peter wrote years later in his first letter about Jesus. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with a joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

That's the Christian life. Inexpressible and glorious joy and love for the one who first loved us and was willing to lay down his life for us. The issue, of course, is ultimately an issue of life and death.

Jesus says a number of times in the Gospels, whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.

Jesus knew only too well that the hostility against himself would lead not to loss of reputation or loss of honor, not to imprisonment or banishment, but to violent death.

[ 26 : 35 ] And he knew that his loyal followers would also be put to death in large numbers. sober statistics tell us that more Christians were martyred during the 20th century than during the first 19 centuries AD put together.

Following Christ has always been ultimately a life and death issue. It always will be. Peter himself really understood this. In fact, he said to Jesus point blank in John chapter 13, just a few hours previously at the Last Supper, he said to Jesus, I will lay down my life for you.

To which Jesus replied, will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow till you have denied me three times. In other words, Peter, you've spoken rashly.

You don't know yourself as I know you. Which is true of all of us. We don't know ourselves as Jesus knows us. We don't know the point at which our courage might fail.

So let's pray that when the Lord's honor is on the line, we will have the courage to open our mouths. Now, secondly, and more briefly, let's rejoice in the grace of restoration.

[ 27 : 52 ] The four Gospels make it wonderfully clear that Peter is not only forgiven by Jesus for his denials, but is also restored to a position where he can act as an effective pastor of Christ's flock.

The fullest account of this is given in the 21st chapter, the last chapter of John's Gospel. But the other evangelists give us clear hints as well. So, for example, in Mark chapter 16, in Mark's account of the resurrection of Jesus, the angel at the empty tomb says to the frightened women, go tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before you to Galilee and there you will see him.

go tell his disciples and Peter. So the angel is making a point of showing that Peter is included. Or think of what Jesus himself said to Peter in Luke chapter 22.

This was at the Last Supper. Jesus looked at Peter and he said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you. That's you plural, demanded to have all of you, that he might sift you like wheat.

But I have prayed for you, you singular, you Simon, I've prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.

[ 29 : 17 ] Jesus knows Peter's character like the back of his own hand. He knows that Peter's nerve will fail him at the crucial moment. And yet, Jesus also knows that Peter will turn again and be able to strengthen his brothers.

His lapse is not going to leave him permanently weakened. And this restoration happens so quickly. We won't turn it up just now, but in John chapter 21, just two or three weeks after the resurrection, Jesus meets Peter and other disciples.

They've gone fishing. It's first thing in the morning and Jesus appears on the beach. He's got a charcoal fire burning and fish grilling on the fire. And Peter and the others come to the shore and they greet Jesus because they recognize him.

And after they've had their breakfast, Jesus takes Peter and he walks him along the beach and he asks him three times, Simon, do you love me? And Peter says three times over, yes, Lord, you know it.

You know I love you. So the three denials are matched and reversed by three assertions. And notice this question that Jesus puts to Peter.

[ 30 : 29 ] He doesn't say, do you honor me? He doesn't say, do you hold the correct doctrine about me? He says, do you love me? There's the romance. It's the love that is willing to lay down life for him.

Yes, Peter replies each time, you know that I love you. And then each time Peter says that, Jesus says to him, feed my lambs, tend my lambs, feed my sheep.

In other words, Peter, I'm restoring you and I'm recommissioning you. And from now on, you will show your love for me by giving yourself to the life of my flock to feed them with my words and to strengthen them for service.

But it happened so delightfully, quickly. Peter didn't have to do penance for 20 years and wear a hair shirt and have a cold bath every morning at six o'clock to strengthen his moral fiber.

The crowing of that cock was quite enough to make him realize what he'd done and to weep for it. He was quickly restored and the Lord told him to get on with the job of looking after his people.

[ 31 : 38 ] Now just remember John's first readers, John's original readers back in the first century. Here is John writing some 50 years after the events. The first century is now drawing to a close and during that 50 years waves of persecution have assaulted the church and no doubt many Christians had buckled under the strain.

Well John has a wonderful message for Christians who have denied Jesus and that is remember what Jesus said to Simon Peter. Peter denied him three times but Jesus restored him quickly and you know my first century readers, you know how useful Peter's subsequent life has been.

So if you too have denied Jesus tell him how sorry you are ask him to restore you and to make you useful in his service and he will. Isn't it the same for us today?

The Lord loves to restore and to recommission for service those who have denied him. Whether that denial has been by words or by silence when we should have spoken or by some moral lapse or by a period of apathy.

Simon do you love me? Yes Lord you know that I love you. Then give yourself to the life of my people which he did.

[ 33 : 11 ] Well let's pray together. Our dear Lord Jesus we know that it was not out of duty that you laid down your life for us but out of love for your people that you were prepared to go to the ultimate dreadful conclusion of the hatred of the world against you.



How we thank you for it again. Thank you that you were willing. Thank you too that you were so willing to restore Peter this disciple whom you loved and who had failed you and we thank you so much for his many years of devoted service in the years afterwards.

We pray dear Lord Jesus that when we ourselves have failed you you will enable us to get up again to confess our sin to you and that you'll give us the joy of restoration so that we too can serve you in the fellowship of your people and that we can grow bolder and unashamed to acknowledge you to the world.

We ask it for your name's sake. Amen.