

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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DENIAL

Matthew 26:31-35

In case the thought has already crossed your mind, I'm going to get this out of the way right at the start: Denial is not just the name of a river in Egypt. For Peter, it was a painful fact of life. Now that we've taken care of that, we can take a serious look at what happened to Peter in the crucible of testing.

Let me set the scene: It was the night before the crucifixion of Jesus. It was the night Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and washed the feet of His disciples in the upper room. It was the night Judas, prompted by Satan, betrayed Jesus into the hands of the Jewish leaders.

None of what took place came as a surprise to Jesus. He was not a helpless victim of forces or circumstances beyond His control. Jesus knew it was all a part of the redemptive plan and purpose of God. His death on the cross was not an accident. He gave Himself willingly, voluntarily, as an atoning sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sins and to reconcile us to God. Nothing that happened that night, or the next day when He was nailed to the cross, took Jesus by surprise.

For Peter and the other disciples, though, it was a different story. Borrowing from the prophecy of Zechariah in the Old Testament (Zech. 13:7), Jesus warned the disciples that they would all be shaken to the core and abandon Him because of what was about to take place (Matthew 26:31). But neither Peter nor the others believed Him. As was usually the case, Peter spoke up and said to Jesus: "No way, Lord! Not going to happen! Even if everybody else falls away, I won't. I will never turn away from you" (26:33).

It is obvious from our vantage point that Peter didn't grasp the seriousness of the situation. He did not realize how precarious his spiritual footing was. Nor did he recognize his own weakness. With self-confident bravado, which is just what we would expect from him, Peter unequivocally declared his unwavering allegiance to Jesus. And Peter meant what he said. There is no question that he was sincere when he said he would not abandon Jesus.

But Jesus knew Peter better than Peter knew himself. Jesus knew how it would go down. He knew that Peter's courage would fail when the going got tough. And He told Peter that before the sun came up the next morning, Peter would deny Him not once, not twice, but three times (26:34).

Ouch! Hearing that had to hurt, don't you think? But instead of being sobered by Jesus' words, Peter protested even more. In his self-confidence, he boasted that he was ready even to die for Jesus. Or with Him (26:35). And Peter wasn't alone. All the other disciples (minus Judas, who had already left to carry out his plot to betray Jesus) chimed in and said the same thing. They all said they would never forsake Jesus or run away from Him.

You know what happened that night. You know how the story unfolded. You know it was not a shining moment in the life of Peter. You know that the prophecy of Jesus was fulfilled. You know that three times Peter denied knowing Jesus or being one of His followers. Each of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) includes an account of it. There is no attempt to hide it from us. The failure of Peter's courage when put to the test is there for all of us to see.

The Scripture says that when Peter heard the rooster crow, he remembered the words of Jesus and, his heart pierced with shame and sorrow, he began to weep bitterly (Matthew 26:75). His confidence in himself was shattered – which is not a bad thing; it is actually a good thing – and his spirit was shaken by his failure to remain firm and faithful as a follower of Jesus.

But we also know the story doesn't end with Peter's denials. It doesn't conclude with his failure of courage. Peter *did* deny his Lord and Master, just as Jesus said he would. But it was not the end of Peter's relationship with Jesus. Though He had every right to do so, Jesus did not lose faith in Peter. Jesus did not expel Peter from the fellowship of His followers. He did not declare Peter unfit for further service in His kingdom. He did not banish Peter permanently to the sidelines.

If we think of Jesus' prediction of Peter's denials as Act I of this drama, and Peter's denials that same night as Act II, then Act III takes place following the resurrection of Jesus, in John 21, when Jesus appears to Peter and several of the other disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after the disciples have been out fishing all night. After breakfast on the beach, Jesus took Peter aside and three times asked Peter if he truly loved Him (John 21:15-17). Three times Peter had denied his Lord. Now the Lord asks him three times to reaffirm his love and devotion to Jesus. And three times Jesus charged Peter to watch over the flock of His (Jesus') followers, to feed them and care for their spiritual well being. In this way, Jesus restored Peter to his previous place as leader of the disciples, and recommissioned him to active duty in the work of the kingdom. Peter's failure, praise God, was not the final act.

That is the story. It is not a complicated story. But there are at least three important truths we need to see and learn from it.

1. PETER AND JUDAS

The first lesson may be intuitively obvious, but I think it needs to be said. It has to do with Peter and Judas. Both of them failed to stand by Jesus at this critical moment in time. But their failures were not the same. There is (as James Boice says) a world of difference between them.

Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied Him. Judas acted intentionally. Deliberately. His act of betrayal was premeditated. It was carried out "in cold blood" (Barclay). On the other hand, Peter's acts of denial were unintentional. He never meant to do it. In fact, he was sure he would *never* do it. It was absolutely unthinkable to him – until it happened. And when it happened, it was not Peter's faith that failed, but his courage. He still believed in Jesus. He still believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of sinners. But his

courage failed, as did the courage of all the other disciples who ran when Jesus was arrested. Unlike Judas, though, neither Peter nor any of the other disciples, went over to “the dark side” and conspired to have Jesus put to death.

When I say the name Benedict Arnold, what comes to mind? Like Judas, Benedict Arnold is synonymous with *traitor* or *treason*, isn't he? As I'm sure you know, Arnold was an officer in the American army during the Revolutionary War. He served with distinction in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga and in the Battle of Saratoga. After being put in command of West Point, he plotted to hand it over to the British. The plot was unsuccessful, though Arnold escaped to the British and became a general in the British army. Benedict Arnold betrayed his country. He was a traitor. That is the legacy of his life.

Contrast Arnold with another soldier from the Revolutionary War, a young American named Nathan Hale. Hale was captured by the British, charged with espionage, and condemned to die. Before his execution, he made this famous statement: “I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

Benedict Arnold was a Judas. Judas was a Benedict Arnold. A traitor. A betrayer. Peter was not a Nathan Hale. At least, not on this occasion. He did not exhibit the same kind of courage as Nathan Hale. Though his courage failed on this night, later in his life Peter would demonstrate remarkable courage in the face of opposition.

He may not have been a Nathan Hale at this point in his life, but neither was Peter a Benedict Arnold. He was not a traitor to the cause of Jesus. He did not betray his Lord like Judas. In spite of his failure, Peter did not stop believing in Jesus.

2. IT CAN HAPPEN TO YOU

The second lesson to take from Peter's denials may be intuitively obvious as well: What happened to Peter can happen to anyone. It can happen to you. It can happen to me. No one is immune to the temptation, in one way or another, to deny that we know Jesus, or that we believe in Him, or that we are His followers. Or the temptation to hide our light when Jesus wants us to let it shine for Him.

Peter thought it could never happen to him. Others might turn away from Jesus, or run for their lives when they came under attack. But not Peter. It would never happen to him. He was so sure of himself. But he was wrong. And you and I are wrong if we think that we are so spiritually strong, so mature in our faith, so adept in dealing with temptation, that it could never happen to us.

What does the Bible say? It gives us this warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12: “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!” Get that? We are just as capable of messing up as Peter or any of the saints who have come before us. Self-confident pride goes before a fall (Proverbs 16:18).

What happened to Peter and the other disciples that night can happen to any of us. That is why the Lord Jesus wants us to be connected to Him and consciously dependent on Him at every moment. In every situation.

It is a lesson Peter himself learned. Listen to what he says in 1 Peter 3:15 (from *The Message* paraphrase): “Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you’re living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.”

A more traditional translation (NIV) is: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have (in Christ). But do it with gentleness and respect.”

Is your heart at attention: Have you set your affections on Christ? Are you prepared to bear witness to His lordship in your life?

When God gives you the opportunity to speak up for Him, or to stand up for Him, even in an environment where being a follower of Christ is not warmly welcomed, follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit and give a clear, winsome and loving witness to the truth. And then leave it in God’s hands.

Never forget that what happened to Peter can happen to you. It can happen to any of us.

3. THE TRIUMPH OF GRACE

The third lesson has to do with the triumph of grace. I’m sure Peter never forgot what happened that night. I’m sure he never forgot the prediction Jesus made, or his own passionate denials that he would never deny Jesus. I’m sure Peter never forgot what happened later that night, and his failure three times to remain true to the Lord Jesus. I’m sure he remembered those things with a deep sense of sorrow and regret until the day he died.

And I’m sure there are things you have done, even if they were long ago confessed and forgiven, that you will remember with a sense of sadness or even shame until the day you die. It is true for me. And I suspect it is true for you.

But Peter’s life did not end in failure. His relationship with Jesus did not end with his denials. The Lord Jesus redeemed Peter and all his failures. The Lord Jesus has redeemed me and all my failures. And He is able, more than able, to redeem each one of us, whatever our failures, whatever *your* failures, may be.

What we see in the restoration of Peter by Jesus following the resurrection, is the triumph of grace. It is a triumph that brought Peter freedom – freedom from the power of sin and guilt in his life, freedom from the fear of failure, and freedom from the prison of shame. The grace of God was and is greater than the failures of Peter. And it is greater than your failures and mine. Isn’t that good news?

May you know the triumph and the freedom of grace in your life. Lord, let it be so in us.
Amen.