

“Christ’s Passion: Peter’s Denial”

March 10, 2019

Luke 22:54-62

SI: It’s six weeks until Easter.

In order to prepare ourselves we’re spending each Lord’s day leading up to Christ’s resurrection by meditating on his suffering for us.

How many times have you heard a joke that starts like this?

A man died and he met St. Peter at the Pearly Gates . . .

Peter doesn’t really let people into heaven,

but he was a great figure in church history.

He was leader of the Apostles, the first among equals.

Paul may have been the greatest theologian but Peter was the greatest leader.

So let’s read about this founder of the Christian church and see his part

Christ’s passion.

INTRO: There's a hypothesis about the New Testament called the Bauer Hypothesis. It's named after a German scholar, Walter Bauer. He said the New Testament is a propaganda document written to support one particular version of Christianity.

Bauer argued that back at the beginning, right after Jesus, there wasn't just Christianity, there were many Christianities. There wasn't just one group of authoritative apostles, there were many competing groups claiming authority, each claiming that they were the ones who got it right about Jesus.

But the version of Christianity that won out and beat the others did so by writing their own story about what they claimed Jesus said and did. The early church leaders took the teachings of Jesus and the events of his life and they changed and distorted them for propaganda purposes to keep themselves in power.

They created a narrative and then imposed that narrative to gain control.

The Bauer Hypothesis had a lot of influence at one time but it has been discredited for a number of reasons. One of the big reasons is its failure to explain stories like this one about Peter's denial of Christ.

If the New Testament is propaganda to keep the apostles in power, and if the people who wrote the New Testament had no problem changing and distorting the historical record to make themselves look good, then they never would have included this story.

They would have buried it.

Here we have Peter, one of the great founders and leaders of the early church, and he's presented as a trembling coward who is too fearful to even answer the questions of a servant girl.

Is this the kind of story the early church would make up?

Is this the way you would consolidate power and assert authority?

Of course not. That's ridiculous.

This comes into even sharper focus when you look at the subtle differences between Luke's account and Mark's.

Luke did leave out a detail that makes Peter look especially despicable.

Mark tells us that the third time Peter was challenged and asked if he was one of Jesus' disciples he called down curses on himself and swore:

I don't know the man.

As I said, Luke leaves that detail out. Maybe out of deference to Peter.

But here's what's so significant about Mark including the detail.
Where did Mark get the information for his Gospel? From Peter.

Mark was Peter's assistant.

The ancient church historian Papias calls Mark's Gospel the Memoirs of Peter.

So if there was a person who could have suppressed this story or change it
and turn himself into a hero to assert his authority, it would have been Peter.
He could have said: Mark, let's clean this one up a bit. Let's change the narrative.
He didn't. He didn't spare any of the humiliating details.
And so this event is found in all four of the Gospels.

It really happened.

But the bigger question is: Why is it in the Bible?

The Holy Spirit wouldn't put this humiliating detail in Bible just to shame Peter
for all church history. Obviously to teach us some lessons of great importance.
Peter's fall demonstrates three great truths about how God deals with you.

Or, could put it this way, Peter's fall gives us a miniature theology of the
Christian life in three parts.

I'll give them to you as we go.

MP#1 Peter's fall shows that God uses your sins and failures to highlight his grace to you.

Have you ever noticed that in the Bible there is a pattern?

Every time the Lord renewed his covenant with his people—

his people almost immediately turned around and violated that covenant in shameful ways.

Let me give you some examples and you will see what I mean.

The Lord made a covenant with Noah and his family.

No sooner had he done so than Noah's son Ham violated his sacred obligations and dishonored his father and disrupted the family of God.

The Lord made a covenant with Abraham.

I will bless you and make you a great nation and bless all nations through you. Walk before me and be blameless.

No sooner did God make that covenant than Abraham lied about his wife Sarah, said she was his sister, and then just stood by and watched as his own wife was taken into Pharaoh's harem.

Abraham put in jeopardy God's plan to save the world through his promised son.

While the Lord was making a covenant with the nation of Israel—

while Moses was on Mt. Sinai learning about the special relationship the Lord was going to have with the nation of Israel—the great blessings he had for them, and the good life he wanted them to lead—

While that was happening, the people were down at the bottom of the mountain making the golden calf and indulging in an orgy.

The Lord made a covenant with David. He said, I will establish your dynasty.

There will always be a Son of David sitting on the throne of Israel.

No sooner had God made that covenant,

than David committed adultery and murder.

And here, in the story of Peter, we have the very same pattern.

Just a few hours after Jesus renewed his covenant with his disciples—

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, drink from it all of you.”

Before that Passover meal was even digested—

Peter was lying and cursing and denying he ever met his Lord and Savior.

Peter was following in the footsteps of Noah and Abraham and Israel and David.

There used to be a Christian bumper sticker that said: God is my Co-Pilot

I do my part, God does his part, and we make things work.
I'm a partner with God in my salvation and in living the Christian life.
That's bad theology!

God does require you to do your part.

God initiates a relationship with you and he does make requirements of you.
You have to respond in faith and obedience.
He says: I will save you, now, you trust me and obey me.

But we are reminded over and over, throughout biblical history,
that we are not God's partner or co-pilot in our salvation because
we cannot keep these covenant requirements.

His covenant stands, not because we are faithful,
but because the Lord remains faithful in spite of our unfaithfulness.

His covenant stands, not because we are loyal,
but because the Lord keeps his promises, in defiance of our disloyalty.

So in Peter's fall we have this great biblical theme repeated—

Salvation is by grace.

It's entirely God's work and God's gift to undeserving sinners.

As Christians we can look the very worst of sin and moral failure in the face
and know that it is the grace of God that holds us.

MP#2 Peter's fall shows that God uses your sins and failures to humble you.

The church father St. Augustine made a profound observation about this story.

He said that Peter was in a truer Christian

when he was weeping bitterly after his fall,

than he was in the Upper Room swearing his undying loyalty to Jesus.

Peter was healthier spiritually after his sin than before his sin.

How could that be true? Remember what happened at the Last Supper.

Jesus said: You will all fall away on account of me. All going to desert me.

Peter said: Even if they all fall away. I never will.

That's when Jesus said: Before rooster crows you will disown three times.

And we're left with the impression that Peter didn't take that warning to heart at all.

He was very cocksure of himself. He was very prideful

But was he prideful at the end of this story, when Jesus turned and looked at him right after he had denied knowing him for the third time? No he wasn't.

He was ashamed and humbled and weeping bitterly.

That's Augustine's point.

Peter was a better Christian in that moment of humility than he was in his pride.

The healthiest place for a Christian is to be always saying:

"Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Martin Luther put it this way: When the Lord Jesus said: Repent!

He meant that the whole of our lives should be one of repentance.

Why? Is it because we're spiritual masochists and like to beat ourselves up? No.

No. It's because repentance shows us our need for Jesus.

And that's the best place to be.

That 's what the Christian life is—continual dependence on Christ.

And God in his grace uses your sins and failures to bring you daily to that humble place of dependence and repentance.

Allison and I went on a hike in the Sipsey Wilderness two weeks ago.

The creeks were high because of the rain and I didn't want to get my feet wet.

So when we would get to a creek I would carefully put my foot on this rock and then step to the next rock and then jump for the opposite bank.

And I made it all the way to big tree and half way back before missed, got wet.

Some people envision following Christ as stepping perfectly from one right

behavior to the next. Do this right, and then do this right—and keep that up—

and you are a good Christian. You step off the path, and you have failed.

Maybe you grew up in a church like that, or a family like that.

The real Christian is the one who always does things right.

And here is the list of what you need to do and not do.

And here is another list to keep you from even getting close to the no-nos.

If you fail you fail you fall from grace.

What happens when that is your understanding of the Christian life?

You become either prideful or depressed—and sometimes both at same time.

If you are doing good, taking all the right steps you will judge those who aren't.

That was Peter in Upper Room. Even if all fall away, I never will.

If you aren't doing good, and have stumbled then you lose all hope.

But the Christian walk is not taking one perfect step after another.

Instead, we sin with one step, and we ask forgiveness with the next one.

And then we step into sin again, and take another step toward Christ.

That is the walk of the Christian life—sin and repentance,

sin and seeking forgiveness from Jesus afresh.

That's why we always, every Sunday have a time to confess our sins

in the worship service. Because that is the essence of the Christian life.

And we want to model in public worship the reality of our private lives with God.

The Lord doesn't want you prideful or depressed—he wants you humbled.

He wants you to see clearly the reality of your sin.

To name it and take full responsibility for it and not sugar coat it—

He wants you to see the depth of it, your attitudes and motives—

and then to come to Jesus with tears and ask forgiveness for it.

That's what we have in Peter's story.

We don't get to his repentance itself until later, but his bitter tears are a hopeful promise of his repentance and forgiveness.

When you sin, when you fail—in little ways but especially in big ones—

let the Lord humble you, and then turn to him. Take heart in knowing that

in your humility and tears, you are closer to Jesus than you were before you fell.

MP#3 Peter's fall shows that God uses your sins and failures to help you sin no more.

If God's grace is highlighted in my sins,
and if the Christian walk is a continual experience of sin and forgiveness,
then does that mean that I can live as I please, and not worry too much about sin?
Unfortunately, many people have reasoned that way.

They've said, we all sin. Jesus forgives our sin. So let's not be too bothered.
But Peter's fall teaches us the exact opposite.

Think of all the reasons Peter had for not doing this shameful thing:

That very night Peter had been with Jesus in the Upper Room.

He had eaten the Passover with Jesus, heard his words and prayers.

He had heard with his own ears the warning that they would all fall away.

In the Garden, maybe just an hour or two before, he had seen Jesus' agony.

He had heard Jesus say, Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.

Peter ignored that advice, and he fell hard.

And when you look at the circumstances, Peter didn't have anything to fear.

The authorities were only interested in condemning the ringleader Jesus.

Didn't care about these fishermen. None of Christ's followers came to harm.

Suppose Peter had said to the servant girl:

Yes, I've followed Jesus for three years and I'm proud to be his disciple.

What would have happened?

Maybe he would have been ridiculed, but probably not.

Jesus was a figure that was still inspiring a lot of interest. Other servants gathered around the fire would probably have asked him questions about what had heard.

But in the hour of temptation, in spite of all of Peter's advantages,
and in spite of the absence of any real danger, he completely collapsed
under what amounted to very little pressure.

And what followed? Bitter tears. "He broke down and wept."

Peter's conscience tormented him.

And I can guarantee you that night it didn't make Peter feel better to say to himself:

Well, we all sin. And when we sin and repent God forgives. What's on TV?

No. He wished with all of his heart that he could go back in time,
and re-live those moments and be a better man—but the deed was done.
He had been tested and he had failed.

His conscience forced the facts on his mind and would not give him rest.

There's a detail only Luke records. Right after Peter's third denial, the Lord turned

and looked straight at Peter. We know from John's account that Jesus was transferred from court of one high priest to another. When probably happened. Jesus looked straight at him. Can you imagine how that look hurt Peter?

Not because it was a look of accusation, but a look of love.

Jesus had told Peter earlier: Satan wants to sift you, I have prayed for you.

Sin hurts us. It hurts Christians most because it's a sin against God's love.

It's hurts more because our consciences have been restored and softened. And our consciences bring to mind the numerous gracious warnings and helps of God that we have ignored and pushed aside.

Yes, you can know with certainty that you are forgiven—
but sometimes there is regret that you carry until heaven.

According to tradition, for the rest of Peter's life, wept when heard a rooster crow.

Whether that legend is true or not, Peter was wounded by his sin,
And God in his grace, even uses that pain and regret in our lives for our good.

He uses it to help you in future battles.

The pain helps you say: I've been down that road and never again will I do that.

I will fight to be the person God wants me to be.

That's what happened to Peter after this. He became a brave man.

He preached and stood his ground before all opposition.

He did fall once again, about 15 years later, it's recorded in Galatians.

And strangely, in that case, there was also little reason to do so.

But the story of his life, from this point on, is primarily a story of courage.

Is there a rooster crow that brings you a remembrance of painful things?

Maybe a person's name who you wronged deeply.

Maybe a joke or jest about some shameful behavior.

But you can't laugh because you've done that and wept bitter tears.

You know you've been forgiven. You know Jesus died for you. You know that.

And yet there is a regret that pains your conscience.

That is God's grace too. Take comfort in it. Allow it to do it's work.

And you need to know this. You won't bear it forever.

One day all your tears will be wiped away.

CONC: There is a beautiful Catholic church in Jerusalem built on the traditional site of the High Priest's house. This was the place Jesus came for trial. But what is interesting is the name of the church:
It's called St. Peter Gallicantu.

Gallicantu means in Latin, rooster crow. St. Peter Rooster Crow Church. A church named after the great sin of a founding Apostle of the Christian Church. Is that something any man-made religion would commemorate?
We're going to name a shrine after the shameful failure of one of our founders. Of course not. The story would be buried or the narrative changed.

But we get it, don't we?

We understand naming it St. Peter Rooster Crow Church because we know that God is the one who upholds his covenant of salvation—in spite of our unfaithfulness, he is faithful.

And we understand that God in his grace uses even our sins to humble us, and enable us to walk the walk of faith.

So take heart, do not be crushed by your sins and failures,
but know that even in those times Christ looks straight at you with love.