

The testing of Peter

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- [0 : 00] I would like you to turn this in this evening to two very short portions of Scripture. First of all, two words you find in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16, verse 16.
- Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. Now these words are easily carried with us.
- I want you to do just that. Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. This great confession of the Apostle Peter of the Messiahship, Sonship, and Lordship of the Lord Jesus, which he gave in Caesarea Philippi.
- Carry these words with us, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, on to Mark chapter 14. And words in verse 71.
- But he, and this is Peter. But he began to cuss and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak.
- [1 : 14] The contrast is a stagling one.
- And at first sight it's almost inconceivable that these are the words of the same man.
- Yet we know that they are. They are the words of Peter. And when we know that they're the words of the same man, then we begin to feel, well, surely we've placed them in the wrong order.
- Surely the words from the gospel of Mark, he began to cuss and to swear, and he said, I know not this man.
- Surely these words were spoken long before the other words were, and long before he came to know the Lord Jesus. But yet again, if we have any knowledge of the chronology of the New Testament and the events of the ministry of Christ, we know that this is not so either.
- [2 : 30] The words as we've read them are in the right order. The words that were first spoken by Peter were, thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.
- In fact, they were spoken just some months, perhaps six months or seven months before the other words. And that cuts out another possibility that if they, in the right order, there must have been a long period between them.
- It wasn't a very long period. And I think that the contrast in these words, and the fact that they come in the order in which we have them, they compel us to ask about the meaning.
- Of the change that must have come over Peter, the disciple of Jesus, since that first glorious and almost radiant confession that he made of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- What kind of process led to this contrast? What kind of process is it?
- [4 : 04] It must be a process that speaks to every believer in this church this evening, very solemnly. Because if a believer such as Peter can be caught up in a process that believes, and it is true and establishes such a contrast, then it is just possible that we as believers may also be caught up in the same kind of process.
- And perhaps I should preface what I want to say with these solemn words of Scripture.

The process tells us, even before we look at it, that he that he that stundeth, or he that thinketh he stundeth, should take heed, must take heed, lest he also fall.

The story of Peter's denial is the story, I think, vindicated already, not of one's sudden step down into the darkness of denial, but it is the story of a process.

And it is the story of the process of backsliding. There's one reason why I want to look into it with you.

[5 : 40] Backsliding, I think, is always at first a hidden thing. And I think that if we're perfectly honest, most of us who are Christians in this church this evening, most of us will confess to having known something of backsliding in our Christian experience.

Backsliding is always a hidden thing when it begins. And then it goes on in a process until it becomes, in some cases at least, unmoved and a flagrant thing.

We can oftentimes depart from the faith for which we stand and the faith which we cherish. And if we want to understand how in the course of just a few brief months a man could go from the height of a wonderful affirmation of faith to the blackest depths of denial, we have to go back, I think, to the occasion of the affirmation itself.

So immediately after Peter's confession of Christ, Jesus spoke to him and told him of his own purpose to go to the cross.

Immediately Peter had confessed Jesus. Jesus began to teach him that he must suffer many things and be crucified at Jerusalem.

[7 : 27] You find that in the context of Matthew 16, verse 16, just further down. And you find immediately, I think, immediately there you find the first step in what was to become the process of Peter's backsliding from Jesus.

When Jesus said, Peter, I have to go on to Jerusalem and to suffer and before me there is the cross, Peter said, Not so, Lord. Far be it from thee.

This shall never be to thee. And you know, surely there's not one of us that can have sympathy with Peter when he felt like that about Jesus.

A cross. Suffering. Death. What people could only regard as murder. Surely, Master, surely never. Far be it from thee.

At the moment he said that, I believe that he passed out of close and immediate fellowship with his Lord.

[8 : 47] My Christian friend, it is terribly easy for the Christian to take a step that leads him out of close, intimate fellowship with Christ.

Jesus was saying before Peter the way of the cross. And Peter didn't like it. Or can I say this? That when you and I, as Christian believers, I'm not talking about unconverted, uncommitted people, but when you and I are confronted with the way of the cross, we tend to react just as Peter reacted.

Not so, Lord. Surely, Lord, there's some other way. And the answer of Jesus is always no other way than the way of the cross.

Except a man deny himself daily. Except he dearly take up his cross. Except he dearly walk in the way of the cross.

Except he is dearly crucified to the world and the world is crucified to him. He cannot be my disciple. Now, what happened here?

[10 : 09] Well, I think basically it's very simple. Peter couldn't, couldn't understand the way of the cross. He had understood the revelation of God.

He had understood the revelation of the Christ. That was something wonderful. And then the Christ himself began to reveal the way in which the Christ must go.

And Peter couldn't understand it. A cross, and death, and suffering. And the moment Peter couldn't understand and couldn't see clearly the purpose of God and the purpose of Christ, he closed his mind to that purpose.

The moment he couldn't understand the method of Jesus and the method of God, he stepped back from the place of absolute, unquestioning trust.

And I suggest that it's very easy for the Christian believer to do the very same. The moment we fail to understand the method, the purpose of God's particular dealing with us, it is terribly easy for us to withdraw our absolute trust.

[11 : 31] And we begin to set alongside the way that God is pointing out to us, we begin to set alongside that way, the way of our own understanding. And that's just what Peter did, and let me say it and say it again, that was the first step in the process of his backsliding.

He couldn't see how the way of the cross was going to build the church of God. He had expected, he had hoped for so much from this Messiah.

He was the deliverer that he had looked for and that Israel had looked for and now the deliverer was talking about our cross and about death. And Peter just could not accept the Lord's estimate of necessity.

Peter, it must be. And Peter couldn't see it. And the moment he couldn't see it, his faith wavered. Even at this stage of his discipleship, Peter was just beginning to learn that the just shall walk not by faith, not by sight, but by faith.

and he wasn't prepared to walk by faith where he couldn't walk by sight. So I think that here begins the first lesson for us from Peter's denial.

[13 : 09] Wherever there is arrested development of Christian life, wherever Christian faith is arrested in its development, there will be a deterioration in Christian character.

That always follows. The moment you and I loosen our trust in Christ, that moment there is no longer whole soul commitment.

And at that moment, our character, our Christian character, begins to deteriorate and we are open to all sorts of dangers. I believe that the Christian life pointed out in the New Testament, the Christian way must be a way of progress.

We must, as Christian believers, grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And if we are not making progression, there will be degression.

There's no such thing for the Christian believer as standing still. I believe there are men and women in the church tonight, and I don't experience that can testify to the truth of this.

[14 : 29] The moment we stand still, we ask Christians. But the moment we stop progressing, we begin to go back. This is just what happened to Peter.

I must follow Christ fully. or there will be a widening bridge between us. If I don't follow him and progress as he leads me, he will leave me behind.

Once you question Christ's wisdom and Christ's word and Christ's way, there will be a distance which can only increase until the questioning ceases.

this is true in any realm of Christian living. You see, what a demand Christ makes upon his followers.

All, yes all, or nothing. You have nothing less than all. Total commitment.

[15 : 39] Can I just break into this heaven and see here that total commitment is only possible when we see his total commitment to us.

I believe that. Only at the foot of the cross. When we see that Jesus gave his all, his all, only then can we ever have grace to give him our all.

Now, I think that the story of the process from that point on is outlined for us in Mark chapter 14. And we can follow it really from stage to stage as a process.

I want you just to bear with me and take time and let's look at this process. Now, the first step was when he looked at Jesus and said to Jesus, no, not the way of the cross.

Back there in Matthew chapter 16. Come now to Mark 14. And at verse 29 we find this.

[16 : 52] Peter said to him, Jesus had just said, again, the cross was coming.

He had said, all of you shall be offended in me. And Peter immediately steps out and he says, no, no, no, I won't be offended.

that was the second step. And the third step I think we find in verse 37 here. The scene now is Gethsemane.

And Jesus had taken into the fellowship of his agony in Gethsemane. He had taken three of his disciples. And can I again break into this sermon and say this, my friend, you're blessed indeed and you're honoured of God if the Lord Jesus takes you into the fellowship of his sufferings as a Christian believer.

If he makes you one of his special watchmen for him, count that a great honour. He did it for these three, Peter, and Jane and John. And then one of his stones threw from him, sixty feet maybe, and he went into that awful agony before God the Father.

[18 : 21] And then the third step takes place, he comes back. Here in verse 37 we read, he comes and he finds them sleeping and he said unto Peter, and you notice that he doesn't use the name Peter here, he goes back to the name that was Peter's before his conversion.

That itself should speak about the distance that are connecting between Peter and Jesus. And he says, Simon, Simon, do you sleep?

Simon, could you not watch one hour? That's the third step in the process. and then the first step we find in verse 47, the officers had come to the garden to behold on Jesus and the disciple, one of the disciples that stood by drew a sword and smote off the ear of the servant of the high priest and we know that that servant was Marcus and that the one who cut off his ear was none other than our man here, Peter.

And that was the first step. And then the fifth step we find in verse 54, Jesus has been led away. this is what we read on Peter following afar off.

And the last step in the words of our text, Mark 16 verse 71. Peter had followed a fire off, Jesus had been taking him to the chamber of the high priest.

[20 : 14] And Peter was left out in the courtyard and in the courtyard he found a fire and he stood by the fire and then one of them said you're a galilea, you're one of them.

And he said no, not me. And he cushed on his table and he said I don't know the man.

So I want you to be here still patiently with me. Let's look at these steps. The first step was this, he refused to follow his Lord into the mystery and the pain and the agony.

of all that the cross was to mean. He believed that he knew best. And then the second step was this, Peter said although all should be offended, yet will not I.

Both fullness of spirit, he sets himself over against others. the third step is this, failure in his devotional life. There in Gethsemane, when he should have been watching and praying, Peter was asleep.

[21 : 35] Failure in his devotional. And then the next step, zeal without knowledge. He draws the sword. The fifth step, following a fire off, because Christ had rebuked him.

And the seventh step, of the sixth step, warming himself at the enemy fire, and then the next last, final, irrevocable step. Someone has put it like this, a laughing maid, and a lying apostle.

I know not. Now that didn't come in one sudden, swift transaction. It wasn't just that Peter had walked for all these months.

In the light of the confession, he had made thou of the Christ, the Son of the living God. It was that process had started almost immediately then, and had gone down on from step to step to step, until at last, Peter was in the place of denial of my Christian friend.

I, in all my experience of dealing with Christians, and especially with young Christians, I have never found a person yet who backslid in one huge step.

[22 : 56] There has always been a process involved, and it has really always, very closely, parallel, the process that we're chasing out here in the life of Peter.

Let's take time later to just to look at that process more closely still. Let's remember this, how natural the story is, how human, how human Peter was, of course he was, flesh and blood like you and like me.

after Peter refused the cross, you remember that Christ's victim, he said, get me behind me, Satan, and Peter took that in absolutely the wrong spirit.

and from that moment on, I think Peter was conscious that Christ wasn't really able to trust him fully.

can I ask you, Christian man and Christian woman, can I ask you, are you living in such a way just now that you know that Christ can put his absolute trust in you?

[24 : 25] Now, note what I'm saying. I am not saying, are you living in such a way that you can put your absolute trust in Christ? But I am saying, are you living in such a way that Christ will trust you implicitly with his cause and with his glory and with his work?

Are you? Peter wasn't and he knew he wasn't. What a psychologically unspiritually damaging thing it was for Peter the moment he felt, he's not trusting me now.

that itself put a strange sense of distance between Peter and the Lord. And my Christian friend, I believe you know what Peter felt, don't you?

You too have known a sense of distance creeping into your fellowship with the Lord Jesus. And you know, this is the fellowship that matters most.

It's not your fellowship with other believers. that can sometimes be widened in a sad way too, but the basic fellowship is the fellowship between your soul and Christ.

[25 : 41] And it's only when that fellowship is strong and healthy that your spiritual life is strong and healthy, isn't it? And then the second step, you remember?

Peter made a loud professional, well they may be all abandon you, I won't. not me Lord, I'll never be ashamed of you.

And we get an insight into this from the gospel of John. Peter saying, where do you go now? And Jesus saying to him, where do I go now?

You can't follow. And Peter says, oh yes Lord, but I can. I'll follow you though all men be offended, I won't, and I'll follow you even to death itself.

And he denied them with the oaths and the cushions. Bestfulness. Separation first of all, then boastfulness of spirit.

[26 : 45] And do you see the principle that's working in Peter? Do you see it now? Do you see it now? he's saying to Jesus, you don't really know me.

Oh, Jesus, you're misjudging me. But give me half a chance, Jesus, and I'll show you. I'll show you how good disciple I am. I'll show you how brave and how staunch.

I'll never deny you. I'll go on down into death itself for you. And it's the very worst sort of spiritual pride that's coming out in Peter here.

Others may be offended, but not me. And how dangerously easy it is for the Christian to get into that state.

Oh, so and so, you know what he's doing now? Oh, well, I never thought he would ever fall to that little role. And the moment we begin judging other people, we are setting ourselves up as an idol in our own heart.

[28 : 02] And then we're just the third step in Gethsemane. Peter boastful became Peter unwatchful. Jesus said to them, watch and pray.

And my friend, Jesus has said that to you as well. Are you watching and praying and following the commandment of Jesus as a Christian? Jesus said, watch and pray.

But self-confidence never feels the need of prayer. And I believe this is the first objective thing that our backslider will really notice in himself.

He will no longer frequent the place of prayer. Invariably, when I have talked with young people who found the Christian way difficult and with not so young people too, invariably, the process, the outward process of backsliding has been furthered when prayer was neglected.

and I have never yet come across a backslider who is really faithful in the place of prayer, have you? Mm-mm. The man who prays does not backslide and of caution neither does the woman who prays.

[29 : 30] When was the arrest in the garden? Peter had failed again and he had been caught out by Jesus. Could you not watch one hour of Peter's?

You know, spend one hour on your knees for me, Peter, when I'm right before the cross. Can you and I spend one hour on our knees when the cause of Christ has been crucified by the world around us?

Can we? And we say, don't know what's wrong with the church nowadays. Don't know why there's no blessing. Why have we got all these empty pews and free St. Vincent's streets? Why does our minister not preach with more anointing and more power?

Have you spent an hour praying for your ministers? Peter, could you not watch with me one hour? So Peter says, I'll need to do better than this.

And then the soldiers are on them. And Peter has a little wee sword. So he says, I'll show him. I'll show Jesus how much I love him and I'll show him what I'll do for him.

[30 : 37] And in a non-sanctified way, without any commandment from Jesus, he pulls out the sword. And his action necessitates the last of the Lord's healing miracles, where sin abounds, grace, grace, grace, the grace of God in Christ does much more about him, doesn't it?

Peter would cover his lack of devotion with a mountain of zeal. And you know, almost always, in myself, I don't know for you, but I speak for myself.

Whenever my devotional life begins to die up and wither, and of course I'm like you too, I go through these periods, and when my devotional life begins to wither, I say, boy, I'll need to get going, need to be busy.

Into the study, and into the car, and out to the people, and visit them. And you never show out the anointing, or the blessing of God, before you go to do it. Don't think of other things that day.

I must be a state of backsliding. Not so, I hope not. But isn't it true? Whenever devotional life dries up, we begin to become very zealous.

[32 : 18] And then the next day, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, falling afar off. And to my own mind, there's nothing sadder in the whole world than to see a Christian, yes, one of God's precious redeemed, falling the Lord afar off.

What a mockery of a Christian, isn't it? Backsliding. What a mockery it makes of a Christian. And he is Peter with his master on the way to the cross.

And it's another Simon, isn't it? It's another Simon who wants to be pressed in to carry the burden for Jesus. And I'm sure that Simon never forgot it.

Never forgot that because he was in the place of backsliding and in the place of denial, the eternal God took another Simon, Simon of Cyrene, to help the master.

I believe that Peter never could forget that. And you know, my friend, if you and I are following Jesus afar off, the same will be true. God will not use, in the normal course of events, God will not use, the normal moon who is following afar off.

[33 : 38] Do you want to be useful in God's service? Do you want to go on into eternity? And hear your well done, good and faithful servant. Do you?

Of course you do, if you have Christ at all. Ah, my friend, before we will ever be able comfortably to expect to hear that, we'll have to serve without the whole heart, don't we?

What shame, humanly speaking, what shame must cover many of us when we appear before the Lord. Lord, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I wasn't there to carry the cross.

Perhaps there were places, just through this last week, perhaps there were places where Jesus wanted you or wanted me. And he wanted us to be there to carry his cross, or to carry the cross, his cross for another.

And we went there because we're following afar off. I think that's sad. I think it's the saddest possible thing that can happen to a Christian.

[34 : 56] And Peter was following afar off because he had been rebuked. And he was getting to the stage, and you and I have been in it too, and they said, well, no more than what I do now, nothing's right, everything's wrong.

What I demand in passion, my master is. No matter what I say, what I do, he's never happy. And he had reached that stage, through a process.

And then there was the fire. And Peter took another step then, didn't he?

He was feeling the cold. And whenever the soul gets away from Jesus, it begins to feel the cold, doesn't it? And whenever we begin to feel the cold, and we feel it whenever we're in Christian fellowship if we're not good children, spiritually.

And we say, we put our clothes of our own righteousness around us, and we begin to look for fires, and it's never the fires of the devotional and the loving and the zealous church of Christ that we look for then.

[36 : 05] It's other fires altogether, painted fires of this world. And Peter went to one of these fires, and he began to hold out his hands and warm them. Oh, Peter, you're in that dangerous place, and let me say to anyone here tonight, and I say with all the love of the gospel of Christ, let me say to anyone who is trying to compensate for their spiritual coldness and their spiritual poverty by warming themselves of the fire of the world, my friend, you're in a bad place, and it won't work.

The world will never compensate, and the fires of the world will never compensate for the warmth of the heart of Jesus. And it's at the fire that out comes the final denial.

I never knew him, and I have known lovely Christian people who got into a process of backsliding are to finish down in the same place.

I wonder what shocks you the most, the denial or the cusses that are accompanied in it. Which is the most shocking to you? I want to test you, as I test myself.

I think that the most shocking of these two were the cusses that accompanied the denial.

[37 : 51] I no longer think so. I think that the blacker, more hideous, more sad, more desperately sinful thing, was the denial itself.

evil. Peter, Peter, Peter was our wholehearted character and perhaps as a reflection of the character that even when he denied the Lord, he had to do with oaths and cusses.

But the oaths and cusses was nothing compared to the denial itself. And denial was always just as sad and just as sinful evilist accompanied not with cusses, but with the culture of a Roman pagan age.

Christian yes, I used to go to church. Yes, there was a time when I believed. But I've improved since then, is the implication.

No, you haven't improved. You've sadly, sadly, sadly gone back. The steps we build here, I think, are the same in any process of backsliding.

[39 : 17] The moment we refuse the cross, the next point will follow. It will be self-confidence, boastfulness. And the next step after that will be our forsaking of our Bible reading and our prayer, our devotional life for dryness.

Then we will be seen without knowledge. And I begin here and tell a little story. I think it was told by one of the great preachers of this century, Campbell Morgan, who was Lloyd-Jones' predecessor in Westminster Chapel.

Lloyd-Jones, in one of his sermons, talks about a girl who came to him once, young lassie. And she said to him, Mr. Morgan, I feel that my spiritual life is dry, not my wee bit.

And I feel that I'm spiritually becoming very cold. old. And I wondered if I should take a job teaching in a Sunday school.

And he said, God forbid, a thousand times no, he said, don't come to me and ask to teach in my Sunday school. When you're following the Lord, far off.

[40 : 44] But the moment you follow the Lord, fully and absolutely, you come. And I'll give you my children to teach for Christ.

I think that was wise, don't you? We were talking this morning, in the bypassing, in the sermon this morning, talking about the church main hold of the wrong kind of weapons in our day, the weapons which are carnal and not spiritual.

And I talked for a moment about the things we look for in our ministers, culture and education, and how we look for the anointing of God's Holy Spirit.

And I was thinking this afternoon that the same thing applies absolutely to the eldership of our church. How do we choose our elders, or how does the church of Christ choose its elders today?

I wonder if we go to the criteria, the biblical criteria of Titus and Timothy. Zero without knowledge.

[42 : 04] And what follows that? The zero goes and we follow a fire prayer of prayer of, just think back to the beginning of your confession.

I can think back to the beginning of mine if you'll pardon me. Don't mean it in. How thrilled I could be when I suddenly would come around.

I would sometimes get on my motorcycle and I would motorcycle and drive a mile to hear the The gospel of my heart was singing all the way to church. And if we were to see services, on the Sunday night, I just couldn't be cared about it and I would be there.

Why? Because the gospel was something new to me. It was thrilling. It was wonderful. I'm sure you are the same. Why are we still the same with you?

Why are we still the same with you?

[43 : 33] Why are we still the same with you? Or I don't know if they ever do it on Monday morning. Monday morning the office needs them. And they would want to get paid for it.

It is even a parody, a sad thing, Christianity can become. An impossible life. It is. And there must be fire of the world.

What writer Peter there? He had no right at all. The process.

The process. Not a suddenly backsliding never is. But a process. But my friend, it is a process which by the grace of God can be reversed in one step.

Jesus looked at Peter, you remember. And Peter went out and he went with bitter tears. But although they were bitter, there were the sweet tears of our true repentance.

[44 : 57] And if the Lord's spirit, we'll go on next Sabbath. He will need to look at how Jesus dealt with Peter and restored him. But remember this.

Remember how it is possible to be caught up in a process that will lead to the place of denial.

And if we feel that we ourselves are caught in a process, there's only one thing to do. Look away to Jesus. For pardon.

And for forgiveness. Let us be. Amen.