

Peter's denial

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn again to the scripture we read in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 26. We'll read again at verse 74.

Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock grew.

Peter said, I don't know the man. We all have our highs and our lows in Christian experience.

Sometimes it may be difficult for us to identify precisely just what the high spots have been. I think if we were to ask Peter, what was the greatest, what was your highest point in your experience as a disciple prior to the crucifixion of Jesus?

He might well have answered us. I think when John and James and I were with him in the Holy Mount, and Jesus was transfigured before us.

[1 : 2 1] Man, that was an experience never to be forgotten. It didn't last very long. I wanted it to continue longer.

I suggested to the Lord that it might continue longer. But I ask you, where out of heaven itself could I have witnessed a meeting between Jesus and Moses and Elijah?

Do you wonder that I wanted it to continue? I could have stayed there forever. But Jesus insisted that we go down again to the humdrum world with its ever-ongoing problems and frustrations.

But I tell you, this was not only physically but spiritually a mountaintop experience.

That's what Peter might have said to us in answer to our question. But perhaps an objective reporter of Peter's discipleship might have told us something different.

[2 : 3 5] He might have taken us to the road towards Caesarea Philippi. And let us hear Jesus ask the question, whom do you say that I am?

And Peter replied, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. To which Jesus responded, blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonas.

Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. That was a moment.

A moment of unique spiritual illumination. That was when Peter perceived ultimate saving truth. His feelings might not have been as excited.

His feelings might not have been as comfortable and cozy as they were when he was on the Mount of Transfiguration. But his perception of reality was unique in its accuracy and relevance.

[3 : 4 4] On the Mount, he scarcely knew what he was saying. He was like a man in a dream, a man in a trance. But here, he is faced with and recognizes ultimate saving truth.

But Peter, who had his high moments, also had his low.

And in the passage before us, we are sad witnesses of the lowest of those low moments. For the man who at Caesarea Philippi said so confidently, thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Now says, I don't know the man. We ask, what has come over Peter? What has happened to change his conviction and his feelings?

We think of him as the foremost of the disciples, the one most ready to speak. And at this particular point, we ask, is he speaking for the others as well?

[5 : 00] Because where are they? They have all scattered. They have all scattered to places of safety. Because this is not a moment when it's safe to be recognized as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth.

What is it, or who, makes this moment dangerous for avowed disciples of Jesus? Well, of course, it had been well known for some time that Jesus had affronted the powers that be in Jewry.

He had exposed the hypocrisy of reputedly holy men, shown how they repealed the commandments of God and replaced them with human traditions and conventions.

He had reached out to folk whom decent people had regarded as untouchable. And he had outrageously declared that such people went into the kingdom of God before the decent and the respectable.

But most heinous of all, most heinous of all, he had made claims to be the Son of God, equal with God, which in the opinion of the rulers of the people and of the people generally, was blatant blasphemy.

[6 : 33] And the Jewish leaders would say that they had borne with this condition of things with marvellous patience up till now.

There were times, indeed, when they had planned, they had almost lost patience and planned to take Jesus and put him to death.

But always something intervened. The time wasn't right. The people in the eyes of the rulers were so far deceived that they would resist any attempt to capture Jesus.

But now, things had come to a crisis. Jesus, in their view, had gone beyond, gone over the score.

That entry into Jerusalem, on the cult, the fall of Anas, it was, in their view, a contrived effort to fulfill prophecy and present himself as king.

[7 : 43] King of the Jews. And it was the pinnacle of impudence and of the mockery of the established order. So Jesus himself had provoked the final crisis.

And it so happened. It so happened that one of his own disciples had at this time had enough of false expectation and disappointed hopes. And was prepared to make it easy for the authorities to capture Jesus.

So they came. They came. They came with an armed force to capture him in one of his favorite retreats that was pointed out to them by the traitor.

They had death in mind. Death of Jesus. And death to any who might be foolhardy enough to try to protect him.

It was not. As we noted a moment ago. It was not a time when it was safe to be recognized as a disciple of Jesus.

[8 : 57] So most of the disciples took flight. But we can't desist from asking. Were the disciples, after all, so pusillanimous that they'd take off on the first show of armed force?

Was that attachment to Jesus so light and passing that a few fellows with clubs would make them disperse? I don't think it was so.

They were all reasonably courageous men. And they might have put up some opposition if it were not for Jesus himself. They might have put up opposition if it were not for Jesus himself.

For Paul, Peter, had drawn his sword and wielded it. And others might have followed his example. For it's not so long before that that Jesus had told them, He that hath no sword, let him sell his cloak and buy one.

But Peter got no thanks for his show of opposition to the arresting band. Indeed, he was rebuked.

[10 : 15] Jesus healed his victim. Obviously, Jesus didn't want to be rescued. He was willing to go quietly with his captors.

And what could the disciples make of that? This wasn't the Jesus they were accustomed to. They could remember times when mobs had lifted stones ready to cast at Jesus and he had passed through the midst of them.

They could remember a time when the citizens of a city had wanted to take him and throw him over the cliff. But he had just defied them.

And even here in the garden, when he had asked the arresting band, Who are you looking for?

Jesus of Nazareth. I am he. And when he said, I am he, they fell backward. But Jesus didn't take advantage of their discomfiture.

[11 : 28] He didn't take advantage except to secure immunity for his disciples. He was ready to go with his captors.

What could the disciples make of that? See, all the disciples, all the disciples were influenced by the popular picture of the Messiah as a conquering hero.

He was one whose sword would be red with the blood of his enemies. A triumphant king he would be. And Jesus had apparently given signals of kingship with that entry into Jerusalem that so offended the rulers.

No way, no way would this valiant king be submissive to a handful of thugs, even though they had the warrant of the Sanhedrin.

This was the moment, surely, for the king to strip off his disguise and be acclaimed. But he submits.

[12 : 41] He submits to be led like a lamb to the slaughter. This is not the Jesus we know, the disciples might say. This is not the Jesus we know.

This is not the behavior of the expected Messiah. And this shattering of expectation is more potently disarming and frightening than the clubs of the arresters.

When hope and expectation have been shattered, smashed, it's time to go.

The game is up. There's nothing to fight for. All is lost. So most of the disciples forsook him and fled.

But not John and not Peter. And it's Peter's behavior we want to observe more closely. John appears to have had an advantage in that he was personally known to some of those in authority.

[13 : 52] So even though he too might have been traumatized by the shattered expectations that pulverized the others, he determined to use his advantage to keep close to Jesus and see what would develop.

But Peter, Peter had no ally in the enemy camp and could expect nothing but naked contempt and ridicule and condemnation from the entourage of the high priest.

But he followed Jesus. Hurt he was. Embarrassed. But he followed Jesus.

In his state of mind he deemed it necessary to keep at a distance. He couldn't understand his master's behavior. He couldn't understand and without doubt he was hurt because his proffered help had been so coldly rebuked.

He felt as though he was an embarrassment to Jesus at this moment. So although he followed in his embarrassment he can only follow at a distance.

[15 : 09] He followed at a distance and had perforce to mingle with the servants of the high priest who were excited by the apparent downfall of Jesus.

He followed at a distance and has earned many a harsh criticism and condemnation from preachers and people who see that distance and that company as inviting disaster.

disaster. Well that distance and that company may have invited disaster. But often I wish that some more consideration were given to Peter's feeling.

You see he appeared to have been given the brush off in Gethsemane and that would make him shy of a close approach to his master at this moment. He couldn't let Jesus altogether out of his sight.

He was determined to see how things would develop and end up. He loved Jesus but he was frustrated by the open refusal of his help.

[16 : 22] But he so far contained his sore feelings as to continue following. Maybe things would turn out better than appeared likely.

Maybe Jesus was following a plan of his own not understood by his disciples so he was. It was worth holding on. At this point possibly we should pause and remind ourselves to be on guard against any uprising of a feeling of resentment that we may have due to a misunderstanding the actions of the Lord.

And that causes us to hold aloof from him. Sometimes people feel hurt by God's providence. Sometimes they feel even that he has dealt unfairly with them.

And these can be moments when standoff from God seems appropriate. But still even if we feel we have to stand off a bit we must follow.

Peter Peter witnessed the first examination of Jesus before Caiaphas. It was obviously a mockery of justice for Peter could tell that most of those so-called witnesses were lying.

[17 : 59] But Jesus was silent. It wasn't like him to be silent when faced with blatant falsehood and hypocrisy. Peter could recall the thundering condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy.

he could recall the Lord's denunciation of the cities that had seen most of his mighty deeds because they believed not.

But he said nothing to refute those obviously lying witnesses. And he just clammed up when the high priest tried to goad him with what these people said.

only when he was charged on oath before the living God to tell them if he was the Christ did he reply.

And then it was in terms that were bound to infuriate his interrogators. I say to all of you in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming in the clouds of Heaven.

[19 : 14] Now there had been times as Peter could recall when Jesus had been notably reticent with regard to his essential being and glory.

When he and the three disciples had been with him on the Mount of Transfiguration he had bound them to secrecy with regard to what they had witnessed.

There was a time too at the Feast of Dedication when Jews of Jerusalem came in Solomon's Colonnade and challenged him how long will you keep us in suspense if you are the Christ tell us plainly.

And instead of the yes or no response that they wanted Jesus told them to go away and reflect on the evidence of his miracles. on yet another occasion when he was challenged with regard to the source of his authority he refused to tell unless those leaders those questioners could also tell him the source of John the Baptist's authority.

But here here before the high priest there's no trace of reticence. here came the plain of vowel that they wanted to hear but which they were not prepared in any circumstances to accept.

[20 : 47] It might appear to Peter that Jesus had chosen the wrong time and place to make this unequivocal claim. he is a sympathetic onlooker but he can't understand how Jesus seems to play into the hands of his enemies.

He's totally confused. Nothing is turning out the way he had anticipated. Jesus doesn't want his help and he's not helping himself.

Then came a servant girl and took a look at Peter. You're one of them she said.

You also were with Jesus of Galilee. It's not just the girl. It's not just the mocking eyes and the cynical grins of the guards.

It's Peter's own total mental and spiritual confusion. He hardly knows what he's saying. I don't know what you're talking about he said.

[21 : 57] And when challenged a second time he said I don't know the man. And a third time he says it even more vehemently. I don't know the man.

It's terrible. It's terrible to hear Peter say that. It's terrible to hear him repeated and call down curses on himself as he says it.

And you know I think it's the measure of truth in his statement that makes him curse. It's the measure of truth in his statement that makes him curse.

For as in his present perspective this is not the Jesus he knew and loved and followed. What a fool he'd been.

Jesus had told him how it would be but Peter hadn't believed him. Peter indeed had objected and contradicted the Lord.

[23 : 04] He wanted to change the Lord's mind to get the Lord to change his mind. but he wouldn't change. And Peter may think if I'd been a bit more assertive if I had been if I'd kept nagging the Lord would it have made a difference?

But Jesus said I was speaking Satan's language. Even so Peter curses himself for giving up. The man before Caiaphas is almost a stranger.

I don't know the man. As I reflect like this I'm not trying to excuse Peter.

He wouldn't thank me for that. No one had a clearer and more horrifying apprehension of the enormity of his deed and guilt and disgrace than Peter himself.

He won't enter any plea of mitigation. but what I am attempting is to understand the character breakdown that Peter experienced in the trauma of the events leading up to the condemnation of Jesus.

[24 : 20] I'm not entitled to self-righteous horror as though I could never sink to such depths as Peter planned. but I tell you this.

I tell you this. At the moment when Peter seemed to have rejected his Lord, the Lord laid strong hold on him. Luke tells us that when, as Christ had foretold, the cock crew, the Lord turned and looked straight that, Peter.

What was in that Luke? Don't you know me, Peter? Don't you know me? Do you really not know me, Peter?

I know you. I know your weakness, your confusion, your mental and spiritual disintegration. I know it. I saw it coming and I told you about it.

Remember, Peter, I told you that Satan wanted all of you to sift your sweet. And I prayed specially and specifically for you, Peter. Now you think your love is dead, but your love will be reborn.

[25 : 42] It is already, it is already being rekindled this very moment, and you're beginning to know the pain, the pain of rekindled love.

The pain of recommencing circulation when fingers and toes have been frozen is as nothing to this, as nothing to the pain of rekindling love, where the loved one has been so sorely wronged, and it seems there's no opportunity to tell him of how that wrong is regretted.

It seems there's no opportunity to tell him of the sincerity and depth of repentance and of the will to make amends. Peter saw the Lord's look, and he went out and wept bitterly.

There's self-darnation in those tears. There's shame and humiliation in those tears, but above all there's wounded love in those tears.

I love, but I have lost my love. But there is pity, there is understanding, there is compassion, and there is enduring love in the Luke that Lord turns upon Peter.

[27 : 17] Yes, Peter was assured, of the enduring love in the Luke of Jesus, but it was wounded love. And Peter had to live for three nights and three days hating himself for what he had done.

If only, if only he could get the opportunity to tell Jesus how sorry he was and how deeply he loved him.

But it was over. Jesus was done to death. It was over. but it was over only for three days and three nights.

And then Peter got a message from one of the women who had found the tomb of Jesus empty and met with Jesus. And the messenger told him that Jesus had said, tell my disciples and Peter that I am risen and I go before you to Galilee.

Peter for whom he had prayed specifically. Peter who was so self tormented. Tell Peter he wants me specially to know.

[28 : 45] He wants me specially to know. Because he knows I need him specially. Peter and Jesus knew Peter's special need.

He knew how suspicions and doubts would linger among the disciples afterwards even though Jesus was risen. So among his fellow disciples he reinstated Peter.

Three times he questioned and perhaps the fact that he was questioned three times meant that Peter was hurt a bit but it won from Peter the declaration he wanted to make.

It won from Peter the declaration the Lord wanted to hear. Lord you know that I love you. And Peter was recommissioned.

Feed feed my sheep. feed my sheep. No wonder no wonder that henceforth Peter can hardly speak without bursting into song.

[29 : 58] song. You meet him and he tells you or he sends a letter and he tells you praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead into an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade.

That is Peter renewed. Peter recovered from his ignorance from his breakdown from his fearful trauma.

But just by way of conclusion I want to ask what is the relevance of all this to our present situation? We haven't melled over Peter's sad lapse out of any morbid interest in the failings of some of the foremost of God's servants.

What we have to do is ask whether we ourselves have been guilty or are likely to be guilty of the same sort of action as Peter.

Peter's action has been clearly labelled denial and people have no doubt about its disloyal character.

[31 : 35] But perhaps we or some of us are equally disloyal. We don't call it our action by that name.

We don't call our action by the name of denial. We cover it over with better sounding explanations. We talk about fear. We talk about uncertainty.

We talk about unworthiness. Peter said, I don't know the man. We are more deceptive. We take a round of words.

we say, I admire, I trust, I even love the man. But I can't bring myself to do what he tells me to do in remembrance of him.

isn't that disloyalty? Remember what Jesus said, if you love me, keep my commandments.

[32 : 38] Remember what is the good shepherd he said, my sheep know my voice and they follow me. Do you know the voice? Do you know the voice of Jesus?

Jesus, if you know his voice, you must obey it. If you know his voice and you don't obey it, you will be deeply hurt and you will weep like Peter because you hurt your Lord and Savior.

Now weep. Weep over past disloyalties, but don't repeat them. then you will know that joy comes in the morning.

Let us pray. Thou art God who knows everyone's heart, who searches the heart and tries the reins of each one of us.

things. And we pray that we may know the gentle touch of thy healing upon us and that we may know also the firm touch of thy discipline upon us, that we may be enabled to say after our Redeemer himself to do thy will I take delight.

[34 : 05] to thank God