

Prayer

Jesus, Your presence makes a difference to me today. The difference between being aimless and being purposeful, between feeling bad and feeling encouraged, between living for myself and living for others, between closing up my mind and sharing myself with others, and much, much more. Yes, Lord Jesus, Your presence makes all the difference to me, for You are life in all its fullness! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think back to the time when you first became aware of Jesus and of your faith as a Christian. Give thanks to God for all that this means to you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the witness of the church** *Pray for the church buildings near where you live and work; pray that they will be used to God's glory*
- *Give thanks for the many different gifts God gives to people*
- *Pray for peace in Israel at a critical time in talks with the US*

Meditation

May the Lord give each of us

A rainbow for every storm,
A sign for every trial,
An answer for every prayer,
And a smile for every tear,

For in the providence of God,

All flowers wither
All stories end
All songs have their finale,
All memories fade.

But a true friend in Christ

will always be loved
and receive love given
will always be open hearted
and remain special in the Lord

Thanks be to God, AMEN

Bible passage – Matthew 26:69-75

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You too were with Jesus the Galilean.'⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

⁷¹ When he went out to the gate, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to those standing around, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.'⁷² He denied it again with an oath, 'I don't know the man.'

⁷³ After a little while, those standing there came up and said to Peter, 'You are also one of them, for sure, for your accent gives you away.'⁷⁴ Then he began 'to curse, and he swore, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed.⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered what

Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

Bible Study

Review

This is the last story about Peter in Matthew's Gospel, and it is a deeply painful passage, which describes how Peter finally let his Lord down by denying Him three times (26:75). Still, Jesus had told Peter that he would deny Him in exactly this way, earlier that same day, after the supper they shared together and before Jesus went out to the Garden of Gethsemane. When Jesus said this, Peter had stood tall and said he was willing to die for his Lord (26:32), but the memory of this makes the story all the more painful. We can read this story and feel sad that Peter was unable to sustain his discipleship at this crucial moment, but in the back of our minds, we all know that we would hardly have fared better. Of course, we know that Peter was forgiven by Jesus after the resurrection (John 20:22, 21:15f.), and because of this, we tend to read the story as an example of the saving love of God found in Jesus Christ. Few would think that this great story is found in Scripture for any other purpose.

There is more for us to discover, however, for as a carefully read of our passage shows, there are a number of intriguing similarities between this passage and the previous verses about the initial interrogation of Jesus. Jesus had stood firm after His capture, but here, Peter collapsed; Jesus faced His accusers, and Peter walked away; and under pressure, Jesus confessed who He was in compelling terms (26:64); and in this story, under different pressure, Peter caved in and denied His Lord (26:70-74). In His earlier teaching, Jesus had said '*everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before others, I will also deny before my Father in heaven*' (10:32,33). Jesus led the way by acknowledging His Father before Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin and the whole world; but here in this story, Peter cursed his Lord (26:74).

Peter's ultimate failure is full of pathos, and yet it would be wrong to focus on Peter alone, for all of the disciples had agreed with him that they would stay with Jesus unto death (26:35). The others had all long since gone, and just as Peter had represented them for good or bad in the past, he also represented them at this point of their collective failure, following and pursuing Jesus as far as he could, but only so far.

I am not sure we are intended to judge Peter too harshly, however, because he still represents people now, just as he represented the disciples. His failure was profoundly human and tragic, and what happened contains lessons from which we can learn. Perhaps the most powerful verse of the whole story comes at the end, describing Peter's reaction to the realisation of his failure. Matthew tells us that he wept. Now, this weeping was almost certainly the beginning of Peter's repentance, as true weeping can often be. Jesus had always call people to true repentance (Matt 4:17), so if this was the first true and heartfelt repentance that Peter expressed before God, as it may have been, it was entirely necessary for the Lord's eventual compassionate forgiveness of Peter. Unless we interpret these events in this way, it makes little sense for our Lord to express total confidence in all the disciples, including Peter, when after He had been raised, He commissioned them to evangelise the world (Matt 28:16ff).

This passage contains important truths about Jesus' salvation of humanity. It reminds us that it is impossible for us to keep the world's evil pressures at bay without the presence and mercy of Christ, for His power and presence sustains us and brings us through such trials. The pathetic picture of Peter's weeping is very famous, and so it should be. The great Peter, the one on whom the church would be built, was brought as low as it was possible to go, in order to be lifted high again after the resurrection due to his repentance and the redeeming work of the Saviour. Peter's story is a true Gospel story.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The accusations against Peter and his response
 - Charge 1, the approach of the servant girl
 - Charge 2, the approach of the second servant girl
 - Charge 3, the challenge of those nearby
- The crowing of the cock

Going Deeper

The accusations and Peter's responses

Peter was there with Jesus when He was teaching in the Temple drawing crowds, and had been present in the Garden of Gethsemane when the Temple guards and others came to arrest Him. It is even possible that it was He who created a scene in the Garden by drawing His sword and suffering a harsh rebuke from the Lord (26:51, 52).

Peter was described as 'entering the courtyard' just before Jesus was taken before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. He had not simply fled, but doubled back to try and make good the promise that he had made not to fail Jesus in his hour of need (26:33-35). Ironically, as Jesus made his great 'Statement of Faith' before Caiaphas (26:64) and endured the insults and abuse it provoked, Peter was enduring the indignity of the collapse of his morale and faith under pressure from some servants.

Charge 1

It began with the approach of a servant girl, someone of whom Peter would not normally be afraid. Yet he was completely caught off guard by her words, accusing him of being with Jesus, 'the Galilean' (26:69). It is impossible to know where the girl had seen Peter in the previous few days or hours, but he wanted to maintain anonymity in order to try to stay near to Jesus. Unfortunately, Peter had not learned the spiritual truth that you cannot do this, and it is impossible to follow Jesus anonymously. The accusation of the girl 'You too were with Jesus' (26:69) exposed Peter completely and threatened to 'blow his cover'.

Peter's reply was addressed to all who might have heard or overheard the servant girl's challenge; 'I don't know what you are talking about'. He was not going to let suspicions grow about him in that setting, because anyone identified as being with Jesus risked being taken captive. In his blindness, and overcome with the fear of others, Peter reacted with instant denial, disassociating himself from his Master. Strangely, although we all know it was wrong for Peter to deny knowing Jesus, we can all empathise with his situation, and few of us would dare say that we could have done any better.

Charge 2

Peter now moved away from those gathered in the courtyard, towards the gate. He already had in mind to get out, perhaps to seek a better vantage point for observation. As he did so, another servant girl made an even stronger and more public accusation that Peter had been with Jesus; this time identifying Jesus as a 'Nazorean'. One can well imagine that the second girl was a friend of the first, challenging Peter more firmly after seeing her friend's accusation rebuffed; 'this man was with Jesus!' she said. Peter swore, and proceeded to dig a deeper hole for himself. The accusations would not go away!

When scripture says that Peter swore an 'oath' (26:72), it did not mean bad language. Typically, in those days, an oath meant calling on a pagan god, for example 'may the gods do to me, and more, if ...', and it was a terrible lapse into Peter's coarse past as a fisherman. Jesus, however, had taught that although the Old Testament said 'You shall not swear falsely', a disciple should 'not swear at all ...' (5:33). By swearing, Peter wandered further away from his Lord, compounding his denial by calling Jesus 'the man' (26:72). It was a long way from his great affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah (16:16).

Charge 3

Finally, some men came to the rescue of the girls who Peter had put down. They could hear the Galilean accent, which is unknown to us today, but was apparently very distinct, and an object of humour to Judeans of the Jerusalem region. They came up to Peter, standing in front of him and posing a direct personal threat. Two male witnesses were needed for a formal accusation to be made against someone, and the whole scene became very tense.

Peter's response was to curse and swear again, repeating 'I do not know the man' (26:74). However, although we use the word 'curse' entirely generally today, in those days cursing was always done against someone or something. Peter was either cursing himself, which was unlikely; or he was cursing the men in front of him, something which would have made an inflammatory situation worse; or he was cursing Jesus. The terrible truth was that by cursing his Lord, Peter kept the men from taking hold of him, and at the very moment he thought he had saved himself by cursing Jesus, the 'cock crowed' (26:74).

The crowing of the cock

This dramatic moment in which Peter recognised his failure remains one of the most poignant moments in the whole Gospels. One denial had not been enough to save his skin, but as Peter escaped the courtyard at his third denial, his remembrance of Jesus' words broke him (26:34), and he wept. Some people have sought to find an explanation of the cock crow, such as whether this was a Roman system of time keeping in the night, or the announcement of morning, or even the apparently random annoyance of evil spirits. None of this is helpful or conclusive. For Matthew, this is a fulfilment of Jesus' prophecy. It was the sign that drew to an end the story of Peter's personal attempt to follow his Lord in his own strength, an attempt that ended in abject failure.

In verse 75, Matthew's story draws us into the depths of despondency Peter must have felt as he now made his way out of danger and away from the courtyard, weeping bitterly. His heart had wanted to do what was right and his words and actions had led him in the opposite direction. Just as Caiaphas emotively rent his clothes at Jesus' claims to divinity (26:65), Peter's heart was broken and rent asunder in anguish. While Jesus stood His ground in the presence of His accusers, Peter ran away; and as the scribes and elders were hitting Jesus, challenging Him to prophesy, His last prophecy to Peter was fulfilled in the courtyard outside.

Application

In the first part of this study I indicated how Jesus could forgive Peter once he shed tears of sorrow and repentance, enabling him to receive the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel (28:18-20). We can also look back at his great words and deeds of faith with admiration, such as his walking on water (temporarily! - 14:28ff) and proclaiming Jesus as the 'Christ' (16:16). We can see in Peter an example of faith to be followed.

However, that is not the lesson we need to learn from this story. There are clear messages of warning within this text which need to be heard by God's people today, because Peter's behaviour, out of the best of intentions, illustrates key features of how godly people can go desperately wrong when they turn away from open confession of Jesus as Lord. The first lesson comes from Peter's first denial, and it is that fear of others and staying anonymous as a Christian is not an option for those who would truly follow Jesus Christ. The second lesson comes from Peter's second denial, and is that if we live in fear of others it leads to unworthy behaviour (oaths, 26:72) and misrepresentation of Christ (Peter called Jesus, 'the man'; 26:72). The third lesson comes from Peter's third denial, and is that the path of self interested behaviour leads to apostasy, the denial of God's name and God's truth (26:74).

It is true to say that just as with Peter, there is always a road back to the Lord by means of repentance, but it is a repentance born of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the willing and broken believer. If we persist in denial, then we do not allow the Holy Spirit to work. Those who choose to keep their faith private, or who deny the divinity of Christ because it does not fit with their view of society, or who say they are Christians and actively practice other religions, for example, neither wish the Holy Spirit to work in them or wish to repent. It requires a miracle of grace, just as the cock crowed for Peter, for someone to recognise where they have gone wrong, and be willing to change.

I end, however, on a positive note with a quote from Calvin; 'Peter's fall ... brilliantly mirrors our own infirmity. His repentance in turn is a memorable demonstration for us of God's goodness and mercy. The story of one man contains teaching of general, and indeed prime benefit for the whole church; it teaches those who stand to take care and be cautious; it encourages the fallen to trust in pardon.'

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Was Peter running away from his responsibilities right from the start, or did he start with the right intention and fall away?
2. Discuss Peter's denials of Jesus. What are the general characteristics of Peter's sin, and how bad were they?
3. Write down a list of feelings that Peter probably had as he left the courtyard of the High Priest's house, weeping. What would you have felt like?

Topics covered by this text

- *The denial of Christ*
- *Sin, failure, and the hope of forgiveness through repentance*
- *The pressure of temptation from the world*

Personal comments by author

The path of discipleship is the path of faith, not the path of denial. Throughout my life within the Western church, it has been fashionable amongst many I have known to promote doubt as a form of reasonable questioning. There is no point in asking questions, however, if there is no hope of finding answers, and the Christian disciple is fundamentally someone who has found answers; they have found the answer to the

meaning of life in Jesus Christ whatever logic may be inadvertently missing or further questions remain. Moreover, as with Peter, a disciple is one who has had to travel a path of repentance and forgiveness before faith can take root.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Look back on your own life and try to recall those moments when you have been caught out doing something you should not. Remember how this felt. Prayerfully ask yourself whether there are things you are hiding from the Lord and search your heart concerning what to do about this.*
 - *Do you find it easy to talk to people about Jesus, and are you content to be identified as one of Jesus' disciples? Discuss your feelings about this with a friend.*
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Final Prayer

Stay with us, Lord Jesus, we pray, and at those moments when we are most vulnerable, help us to remain firm in faith. With Your help, may we take our stand against all that is wrong and evil in our world, and testify to Your saving and redeeming love. We praise You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN
