

denial, Peter's remembrance of Jesus' words finally got to him and he broke down (14:72), and wept. Jesus' prophecy was fulfilled, and this heartbreaking event drew the story of Peter's personal attempt to follow his Lord to an end. He had tried in his own strength, and this ended in abject failure. Mark's words make us feel the depths of despondency Peter must have felt; 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 (14:63), Peter's heart was broken and rent asunder in anguish, and while Jesus stood His ground in the presence of His accusers, Peter ran away; and while those around Jesus were spitting on Jesus, hitting Him and mocking Him as a prophet (14:65), His words of prophecy to Peter were fulfilled, as they spoke, in the courtyard outside.

### Application

In the first part of this study I indicated how Jesus was able to forgive Peter once he shed tears of sorrow and repentance, enabling him to receive the commission to evangelise at the end of the Gospel (16:14f.). However, that is not the primary lesson we need to learn from this story. There are clear messages of warning within this passage which need to be heard by God's people today, because Peter's behaviour illustrates how godly people can go desperately wrong when they turn away from Jesus, despite the best of intentions. The first lesson is that fear of others and staying anonymous is not an option for a true Christian. The second lesson is that if we live in fear of others it leads to unworthy behaviour (oaths, 14:71f.) and misrepresentation of Christ (Peter called Jesus merely 'this man'; v71). The third lesson is that the path of self interest leads to apostasy, which means the denial of God Himself (14:71).

It is true to say that just as with Peter, there is always a road back to the Lord by means of repentance, but this is a repentance born of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a willing and broken believer. If we persist in the denial of our faith in Christ before others, then we place a barrier in the way of the work of the Spirit in our lives. 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, clearly neither wish the Holy Spirit to work in them or wish to repent of their ways. They do not see the need! 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.'

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways are we tempted to keep our faith hidden from others in society?
2. How do people generally 'spot' Christians, and can we avoid being recognised as such if we truly commit ourselves to godly living?
3. Share in your group stories of those moments when you have realised that the Lord is calling you to turn away from what you have done wrong, and put it right.

### Discipleship

*Those who are following the series of discipleship suggestions in Lent are writing a series of reflections on what Jesus felt as He came closer to Easter. The feelings of Peter have been the focus of our discussion of this passage of Scripture. Now try to imagine what the Lord thought of Peter's actions. We know that at the time, Jesus was enduring the taunts of the religious authorities (14:65), but He would have known what was happening to Peter at some point later on. Write down what He might have felt.*

### Final Prayer

Your Passion, Lord Jesus, teaches me to love. Help me I pray to follow your example, and to 'take up my cross' and follow You. I do not know exactly what this means, but You do; and I trust that You will guide me. Thank You, Lord, AMEN

### Prayer

We cry to You, Lord God, our rock and redeemer;  
be our strength when things go wrong and we are weak because of fear;  
be our courage when life is tough and we lack the bravery to fight for right;  
be our inspiration when nothing is happening and we live without purpose;  
We cry to You, Lord God, our rock and redeemer;  
Save us now!

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Universities

Pray today for the basic role of universities which is to teach and award degrees in a wide range of disciplines. Pray for proper standards to be maintained and for the teaching staff who deliver those courses; and pray for the infrastructure of student support which is necessary for students to be housed, fed and cared for. Pray for any students you know at University.

### Meditation

*(A reflection on Prov. 29:11, Is. 18:4, Lam. 3:26, Hab. 3:16, 1 Thess 4:11)*

Go quietly, my soul, and honour the Lord;  
In wisdom, hold back your emotions,  
and do not give full vent to your feelings.

Go quietly, my soul, and be like the Lord;  
Who will wait for the right time to act  
whether it be in danger or in peace.

Go quietly my soul, and expect the Lord;  
He will bring you the gift of salvation  
by which you are eternally set free!

Go quietly my soul, and be patient for the Lord;  
For the day of trouble brings fear,  
Yet He alone is able to save you.

Go quietly my soul, and feed on the Lord;  
Live peacefully and look after yourself,  
So that you are able to do His will.

### Bible Study - Mark 14:66-72

<sup>66</sup> While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's maids came by.  
<sup>67</sup> Seeing Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, 'You were with Jesus as well, the man from Nazareth.'  
<sup>68</sup> But he denied it and said, 'I don't know or understand what you are talking about.'  
Then he went out into the forecourt; and then the cock crowed.  
<sup>69</sup> The maid saw him and began to speak again to the bystanders, 'This man is one of them.'  
<sup>70</sup> But he denied it again; then after a little while the bystanders said to Peter once more, 'Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.'  
<sup>71</sup> Then he began to curse and to swear, 'I do not know this man of whom you speak.'  
<sup>72</sup> And straight away the cock crowed a second time, and Peter remembered that Jesus had said this to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.'  
He broke down and wept.

### Review

This is the last story about Peter in Mark's Gospel, and it is sandwiched between the betrayal and charging of Jesus (14:43-65) and His appearance before the council (15:1-15), which we will read tomorrow. The story of Peter's denial of Jesus is distressing, because Peter clearly

loved Jesus and was intent on doing what was right, but his own mortal frailties were too great for him. At this dramatic moment he was unable to stand up for his Lord..

The story contrasts Peter standing before others in the courtyard with Jesus standing before the high priest (14:53-65) and Pilate (15:1f.), and where Jesus stood firm as God's Messiah, Peter buckled under the pressures of the world. Jesus, under pressure, stood firm and confessed that He was the Messiah (14:62); and in our passage today, under intense but very different pressure, Peter denied even knowing his Lord (14:68,70,71) and walked away. Despite all the teaching Jesus had given about His coming death and resurrection (8:31, 9:31, 10:32-33) and all that had happened since Jesus and His disciples had entered Jerusalem, Peter was unable to translate his faith, love and affection into action; without Jesus there in person to correct him and help him, he was lost. Before the high priest and the council, Jesus acknowledged God as His Father, and in front of a maid and some bystanders, Peter lied; it is a very painful story.

Although Peter's failure is full of pathos, it would be wrong to focus on Peter alone, for earlier that day when the disciples had shared a meal with Jesus and then walked with Him out across the Mount of Olives, Peter had said 'Even though all become deserters, I will not' (14:29,31). Then all the disciples had made the same promise (14:31). Peter was indeed the leader of Jesus' small band of disciples, and just as he led them at their greatest moments of faith, he ultimately represented them in their collective failure. Even though Peter continued to follow Jesus until the point of his own failure, he fled just like the rest of them.

I do not believe that Scripture intends us to judge Peter too harshly, because he represents human failure in general as leader of all Christ's disciples. The story of his failure is profoundly human and tragic, yet it contains many lessons for us now. Perhaps the most powerful verse of the whole story comes at the end, when Peter left the courtyard and wept. His weeping was almost certainly the beginning of his repentance, as true weeping can often be, and Jesus' continual call to all people has always been for true repentance (1:15). If Peter expressed true and heartfelt repentance to God, as I suspect he did, his weeping contained the seeds of hope, for the Lord forgives those who come to Him in repentance (11:25).

If we interpret this passage in this way, then it becomes possible to understand what happened later when Jesus expressed total confidence in Peter and the disciples when He later commissioned them to evangelise the world (16:14f.). The last chapter of Mark's Gospel is difficult to interpret, but there is no doubt that Jesus did meet Peter and the others straight after the Resurrection, and He did not condemn Peter, rather, He loved Him (John 21:15-19)! Surely this was a result of both Jesus resurrection power and also Peter's true repentance.

This passage contains important truths about Jesus' salvation of humanity. Peter's story shows that it is impossible for us to keep the pressures of evil at bay without the help of God through Jesus Christ. His power and presence sustains our faith, and He brings us through the most extreme trials of life just as Peter was eventually sustained. Peter's weeping in this story is famous, and so it should be; Peter, the one on whom the church would be built (Matt 16:19), was brought as low as it was possible to go, in order to be lifted high again after the resurrection after his repentance and the redeeming work of the Saviour. Peter's story is a true Gospel story.

### Going Deeper

In studying this passage further, we will go step by step through what Peter experienced, and discover what this teaches us. Sometimes the most painful experiences of life can be the seedbed of our learning and hence our maturity. Peter had to learn from his tragic mistakes, and so do we.

#### **Peter goes back to Jerusalem**

Peter was there with Jesus when He was teaching in the Temple drawing crowds (ch.12), and had been there in the Garden of Gethsemane when the crowd first began to gather with clubs and swords to arrest Jesus. It is even possible that it was Peter who created a scene in the Garden by drawing his sword and cutting off the servant's ear (14:47 and John 18:10). After this, however, we must assume that Peter fled the scene of Jesus' arrest (14:50). But Peter had not gone so far away as to be unaware of what had happened to Jesus, and went to the courtyard of the high priest, Caiaphas, where Jesus was being held and interrogated (14:53-65). Peter had not simply fled, but got away from the Garden of Gethsemane and then doubled back to Jerusalem and the house of Caiaphas in order to try and make good the promise that

he had made not to fail Jesus in His hour of need (14:31). He is to be commended for this attempt to make good his promise, but it put him under extreme pressure. Jesus was 'on trial' before Caiaphas and Pilate, but in this passage, Peter was also 'on trial'.

#### **The first charge against Peter**

Peter's problems began with the approach of a maid (14:66), someone of whom Peter would not normally be afraid. Yet he was completely caught off guard by both her look and her words (14:67), for she accused him of being with Jesus, who was a man from 'Nazareth' (14:67). It is impossible to know how the girl knew this. It is possible she may have seen Peter with Jesus, or she may have recognised his accent as one who came from the North, but Peter wanted to maintain anonymity in order to try to stay near to Jesus. Unfortunately, he had not learned the spiritual truth that you cannot do this and it is impossible to follow Jesus anonymously. The maid's accusation 'You were with Jesus ...' (14:67) exposed Peter completely and threatened to 'blow his cover'.

Peter's reply was spoken with desperation, and we do not know whether it could have been overheard; 'I don't know or understand what you are talking about' (14:68). He was not going to let suspicions grow about him in that setting, because anyone who might be identified as having been with Jesus risked being taken captive. Peter acted out of an instinct of self preservation a form of blindness which resulted in his disassociating himself from his Master. Out of our own humanity we can see why Peter did what he did and said what he said, even though both we know and he knew that it was wrong to deny knowing Jesus. Few of us would dare say that we would have reacted any differently.

#### **The second charge against Peter**

Peter now moved away from the place where he had just escaped being compromised, going into the courtyard, towards the gate and out into the forecourt, and just then, a cock crowed (see my notes on 14:30 which explain that this may have been the sounding of the first 'watch' of the night, because at the time of Jesus, cocks had been banned from Jerusalem). It is hard not to imagine that Peter would not have realised that this was a warning, given what Jesus said to him earlier; 'before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.'

As Peter repositioned himself in the forecourt, he was seen again by the maid, possibly the same maid (14:69). The girl made an even stronger and more public accusation that Peter was 'one of them'. Peter, however, had dug himself a hole and he was not going to climb out of it. He followed his first denial of Jesus with a second (14:70).

#### **The third charge against Peter**

Finally, the maid went away, but her words had caused the damage and Peter was now in a difficult position. The other bystanders made the third charge against Peter, and they had seen the obvious logic of what the maid had already said. Clearly, they recognised in some way that Peter was a 'Galilean' (14:70), and it is possible that Peter's accent gave him away (it is not said here, but Matthew mentions the accent – Matthew 26:73). Today, we do not know anything about this accent and would not even know what it was if it was written down, but this small matter over which Peter had no control gave him away. He could not escape who he was and no one believed his denials, so he resorted to uncouth swearing and cursing (14:71).

Now when scripture says that Peter swore an 'oath' (v72), it did not mean bad language. Typically, in those days, an oath meant calling on a god, and an example is this; 'may the gods do to me and more, if ...'. To swear or curse using the Lord's name was a terrible lapse into Peter's coarse past as a fisherman, one in which he had probably sworn as a matter of habit. Jesus had taught that although the Old Testament said 'You shall not swear falsely', a disciple should 'not swear at all ...' (5:33), so by swearing, Peter wandered further away from his Lord, and he even compounded his denial by calling Jesus 'this man of who you speak' (14:71). How far Peter had come from his famous affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah!

Nevertheless, by cursing and swearing in this way, it appears that Peter prevented those near him from taking hold of him. Then at the very moment he thought he had saved himself by cursing, the 'cock crowed a second time' (14:71)

#### **The crowing of the cock**

This dramatic moment in which Peter recognised his failure remains one of the most poignant moments in the Gospel. One denial had not been enough to save his skin, but at his third