

When we Fail

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[0 : 00] Well, failure is part of our lives, whether we've failed ourselves or whether somebody else has failed us. And I'm sure many of us will have failed in some way in the past week.

Failed to do something or failed at something. And personal failure, we all know, is one of the most devastating experiences in life. We can be crushed. We can be ruined by failure.

Failure can ruin our reputation, it can ruin our family, it can ruin our career, it can ruin our life. So what do we do when we fail?

Not if we fail, but when we fail. In our Bible reading this afternoon, Mark chapter 14 really highlights the reality of failure.

But it also points towards the hope that Christianity gives to those who have failed. And that's why the Christian gospel is the term good news.

[0 : 58] That's what we mean when we say the word gospel, it is good news. And we see this good news displayed really quite dramatically in the life of Peter, who was one of the disciples of Jesus. What happened in the latter part of our reading was that Peter failed Jesus because he denied that he even knew him.

And so Peter's example is a warning to us about how failure happens. And yet his example is also an encouragement to us because it shows us why failure need never be final when it comes to Jesus.

And so this passage that we're reading this afternoon really applies to all of us. It applies to those of us who do follow Jesus. But it also applies to those of us who don't.

And it is good news for everybody. Because in our culture today, there is little room for forgiveness for when you fail. If you've failed, that's it. You're finished.

You're cancelled. No way back. No more. And yet with Jesus, what we see here is that failure is never final. There is always hope with Jesus Christ.

[2 : 04] So none of us can go so far that God won't forgive and restore us, no matter what it is that we have done. And so let's see this afternoon two simple points.

First, how failure happens. And then secondly, why failure is never final. So first, how failure happens. Well, let's just think, first of all, before we get to these things, let's think, first of all, what is the context of Peter's failure?

Because it comes as Jesus moves towards his death. So Jesus has been on trial before the religious authorities in the passage before our reading this afternoon.

And then in the passage after our reading, Jesus will go on trial before the governing authorities.

And in between, sandwiched between, here is the story of Peter. As if to indicate, whilst Jesus is on trial, Peter is also on trial.

But while Jesus endured the trial, what happens is that Peter fails the trial. And so these accounts here are deliberately intertwined, both the account of Jesus' life as he moved towards his death, and Peter's life as he fails Jesus.

[3 : 13] They're intertwined, essentially, to point us to the good news of Jesus. Because like Peter, we all fail, and so we all need forgiveness. And as Peter discovered, Jesus does forgive.

Jesus does restore. Failure is never final with Jesus Christ. Now, of course, we're not Peter. But the point is, we do have Peter's savior, and that is Jesus.

And so first of all, let's heed the warnings from Peter's failure, because his failure is outlined, it's highlighted in all the verses that mention his name, and they're all scattered throughout chapter 14.

That's why we read different parts from Mark's gospel. And what we see are six things that led to Peter's devastating failure. And these are the six things that are up on the screen. So we're just going to go through these briefly.

So first of all, there's delusion. Verse 29 to 31. Remember, whenever Jesus says something to his disciples, who's the first person to answer or to respond?

[4 : 12] It's always Peter. Peter is always confident in what he claims. And so when Jesus says, all the disciples will fall away, Peter declares, even if all fall away, I will not.

And then emphatically, Peter says, even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you. And so Peter was completely deluded. Despite the bravado, despite the bold claim, Peter was deluding himself because he wasn't ready to die for Jesus.

He wasn't even strong enough to stand up for Jesus. And that's why he denied him. And so there's a warning for all of us here about deluding ourselves, isn't there? By failing to recognize how weak we really are.

We might be confident about what we think we can do. We might even make bold promises or claims in our prayers or when we sing songs in church. And yet, no matter how strong we think we are, we can easily cave in and crumble, just like Peter did.

And so let's not delude ourselves into thinking we're stronger than we are. Or that failure is what happens to other people. But it's not what happens to me. That's the first thing.

[5 : 26] It is delusion. Second, dozy. They're all Ds. So dozy was the best word I could come up with. So a few hours after Peter had made those bold claims, when he was delusional, what happens is he's with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And this is verse 37 and 38 of Mark chapter 14. So Jesus had told his disciples to watch and pray. But they all fell asleep, including Peter, not just once or twice, but three times.

No support to Jesus. He was sleepy and he was weak. And so we need to watch that we don't become like a dozy disciple. In other words, we need to be alert and we need to pray.

If we are going to follow Jesus, then we must listen to Jesus and obey what he says. So delusion, dozy, distance. This is verse 53 to 54.

When Jesus is taken to trial, Peter follows Jesus, but at a distance. Everybody else had deserted Jesus and fled, but Peter didn't. He didn't abandon Jesus completely, but he didn't exactly follow him closely either.

[6 : 39] He took a risk by going with Jesus, but you'll notice that Peter followed Jesus on his terms. That is, he remained at a distance. He wasn't prepared to follow Jesus on his terms.

What were Jesus' terms? Remember, Jesus spoke about being a disciple. Mark 8, 34. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

So here we see Peter not exactly following Jesus wholeheartedly. He tried to follow at a safe distance in order to protect himself. And that can happen with Jesus, can't it?

We can think that we are close to Jesus, but in reality we're distant from him. We can't follow Jesus at a distance, though. With Jesus, it is always all or nothing, as Peter would discover.

And so Peter here puts himself in the worst possible position. Because by hanging back in the shadows, like a coward, he was really setting himself up to fail. And that's why his example is a good warning for us.

[7 : 43] Because trying to follow Jesus at a distance isn't really faithfully following Jesus. Talking the talk really means nothing if we can't walk the walk.

And so we might profess to be a Christian, but there can be a temptation out there in public in the world that we adopt this kind of Peter-like approach.

That is trying to blend in with the crowd, trying to keep in with people, trying to sit back and hope that nobody will bother us or even notice us so that we're left alone.

It's true, isn't it, that we can be afraid to stand up and be counted as being a follower of Jesus. And the reason is we know that associating with Jesus closely will cause others to misunderstand us, to make life difficult for us.

We might lose friends. We might lose our reputation. We may even lose our job because we are associated with Jesus. And so if we do our best to avoid the shame of being associated with Jesus, then the danger is that we don't just distance ourselves from him, but we end up denying him altogether.

[8 : 57] And so Peter shows us how his distance from Jesus quickly and easily led to his denial of Jesus. Okay, that's third. Distance.

Fourth, distraction. This is verse 54 and then verse 66 and 67. So when Jesus was on trial, what was Peter doing? He was warming himself by the fire in the courtyard.

So we leave it. Chapter 14, verse 54. Peter followed him at a distance right into the courtyard of the high priest there.

He sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire. So there's a sense in which whilst Jesus was on trial, Peter was simultaneously on trial.

And yet Peter's response couldn't be more different from that of Jesus. Jesus was being interrogated, spat on, blindfolded, and punched. And what is Peter doing?

[9 : 55] Peter's warming himself by the fire. Jesus was being condemned. Peter was being comforted. So Peter is distracted from what is happening to his master because he is simply taking care of himself.

He's looking after, number one, he's opting for the comfort of the fire so he can avoid the cost of discipleship. Rather than deny himself and suffer, Peter chooses to fulfill himself and be safe.

And we need to be careful we don't opt for the same. Because we can easily pursue the comfortable life instead of the costly life of following Jesus. We can be distracted by living for the nice house, for the nice car, the good job, the large income, the comfortable lifestyle, the fancy holidays, the nice meals out.

All these are good things and they're comfortable things and nice things. But they can give a kind of safety and a security that can actually distract us from following Jesus.

And so distraction. And then fifthly, there's deflection. Verse 68 to 70. Let me read those verses.

This is when the slave girl, the servant girl, questions Peter, but he denied it.

[11 : 11] I don't know or understand what you're talking about, he said, and went out into the entrance. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around them, This fellow is one of her own.

Again, he denied it. So Peter deflects the servant girl's questions. And she's the kind of person you would think that would intimidate Peter. But Peter doesn't hang around to chat with her.

So he tries to evade her questions. And in some sense, we can be tempted to do the same when people probe us and challenge us about our Christian faith or Christian beliefs.

Because if we identify as a follower of Jesus, then we will often be put on the spot and we'll be questioned and we'll be challenged. And we might not be able to deflect the questions that come our way for very long.

And so it's easy, isn't it, to cave in under the pressure. And so if we don't commit ourselves to Jesus and to his teaching and we're not upfront about it, then we will end up denying him.

[12 : 15] And so that's the sixth D. It is denial. Look at verse 70 to 71. Again, he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.

He began to call down curses and he swore to them, I don't know this man you're talking about. So Peter denied Jesus once. Then he denied Jesus a second time.

But when he was challenged a third time, Peter's denial is even more emphatic. So verse 71 is really strong and explicit. It says that Peter cursed.

That's all it says. Peter cursed. Peter cursed something. Peter cursed someone. But it doesn't say who or what Peter cursed in our English translation or even in the Greek translation.

There's no subject to what Peter curses. So it could have been himself, but that's unlikely. So it is probable that Peter actually cursed Jesus.

[13 : 15] Why would he curse Jesus? Well, the best way to prove that he wasn't a follower of Jesus is to curse him. Because you see, Peter is so desperate at this point to avoid any association with Jesus that he actually curses Jesus.

And so if we thought Peter's denial was bad, it is probably far worse, far more cruel than we could imagine. Because this wasn't just failure to identify with Jesus.

This is a shocking public betrayal of Jesus by cursing him. Now, Peter would rather deny, disown, and disrespect Jesus than declare himself to be a follower of Jesus.

That's how big his failure was. Now remember, Peter had spent three years following Jesus as his master. And Jesus had invested so much into Peter. And so, yes, Peter was a disciple.

But Peter was also a miserable failure. And this hit Peter with enormous force there in verse 72. So we read, Immediately the cock crowed the second time.

[14 : 26] Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him. Before the cock crows twice, you will disown me three times. And he broke down and wept.

There's the denial of Jesus piercing Peter's soul. He was on trial as a follower of Jesus and he had failed. And while we'll never be on trial like this, we will be tested and we will be tempted to deny Jesus.

And that's why Peter's failure is really instructive for us. Because his weakness and his failure points to the reality of our own weakness and our own failure.

Because following Jesus, whether it's been a short time or a long time for you, it involves failure.

And so the question is, well, what do we do when we fail?

Well, we need to know that failure is never final with Jesus. And so that's our first point, how failure happens. Peter shows us how failure happens. Second point is why failure is never final.

[15 : 31] Just think about it. How do we know about Peter's denial of Jesus? How do we even know this story happened? This event took place?

Well, the only way we'd find out about Peter's denial is if Peter spoke about it. Because he is the only one who's able to share the details of how he came to deny Jesus.

And so while we're reading the Gospel of Mark, the chief eyewitness to the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is actually Peter. It's Peter's testimony about Jesus and his response to him.

All the things that Jesus said and did. And so the passage we're looking at is probably the leading piece of evidence that supports that Peter is the chief eyewitness for Mark.

And recording his Gospel to us. And so Richard Bauckham, New Testament scholar, he makes this point in his excellent book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. Listen to what Bauckham says.

[16 : 32] He says, In other words, nobody else, nobody would want to highlight Peter's weakness and failure apart from Peter himself.

And so the only possible source for this account of Peter's denial is Peter. And so Peter wanted the shameful story of his denial of Jesus to be included in the Gospel of Mark.

Now, would you want your failure recorded in such a way? I know I wouldn't. I'd rather it was never mentioned. As opposed to it being highlighted in a document that would spread far and wide.

Nobody would want to reveal how bad a failure that they'd been. It's the kind of thing public figures try to hide, isn't it, these days. But not Peter. So why? Why is he so bold about declaring his failure? Well, the only way Peter would have been willing to have his failure highlighted was if his failure wasn't the end of his story. There's a future for Peter after his failure.

[17 : 50] That's the point. And so Peter could tell of his personal failure because he had been forgiven and he had been restored. Peter's failure wasn't final. Far from it.

Peter's failure didn't mean it was the end of the road for him. Because Jesus had future plans for Peter. Now, Peter doesn't make any more appearances in Mark's gospel.

We don't read about Peter. But we know it's not the end of his story because his name is mentioned just one more time. And that was our final reading from Mark chapter 16 and verse 7.

Peter's name comes up after Jesus is raised from the dead. And we get these words. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, he is going ahead of you into Galilee.

There you will see him just as he told you. So Jesus said all his disciples would fall away. Even Peter would deny Jesus three times.

[18 : 48] But Jesus also says he'd go ahead of them into Galilee. And when he went ahead into Galilee, he says to them, I will see you again. So go and tell Peter, I'll also see him.

And so we're reminded that after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter is specifically mentioned because there's hope for Peter. His failure isn't final.

In other words, Jesus will see Peter again. So despite Peter denying and disowning Jesus, Jesus hadn't given up on Peter. This was a promise from Jesus at the end of Mark's gospel that Peter's failure wasn't final and that Peter would be forgiven.

He would be restored as a follower of Jesus. And so let's just think before we apply this to ourselves, how and when did Peter's forgiveness and restoration begin?

Well, surely it starts with the sound of the cock crowing, doesn't it? That's when Peter remembered Jesus say that he would deny him. And then Peter broke down.

[19 : 54] He wept essentially because he recognized his need for forgiveness, his need to repent. His sorrow over his failure was the first step towards his restoration.

Peter then knew he was weak. He thought he was strong, but he knew he was weak and he felt the burden of his sin. And so at the end of verse 72, we leave Peter as a broken man.

He needs to repent. He needs to be remade through the forgiveness of Jesus. And so failure wasn't final for Peter. Not because Peter could somehow do anything about it, but because Jesus would. And that's why Peter's denial really forms part of the narrative of Jesus's death. It seems odd that whilst we're looking at the passion of Christ and his movement towards his death, that there's this bit about Peter.

Well, it was only through Peter's failure that Peter would come to understand the necessity, the need for the cross. And so while this episode that we're reading is about Peter, it is meant to point us to Jesus because it helps explain to us why Jesus came.

[21 : 07] Peter dramatically shows us the need for Jesus to die for our failure and our sin. So Peter, in some sense, is a representative of us all.

And he is portrayed in this brutally honest way. Why? Well, in a sense, to confront us with our weakness, with our failure and with our sin, but also to reassure us that like Peter, we can experience the forgiveness and the transformation that Jesus brings.

Because we know a lot more about Peter when we read the book of Acts. Peter was transformed into this fearless leader of the early church. And so Peter's life was a tremendous testimony of the gospel of grace to the early church, to the early Christians.

Because Peter, the apostle, had failed big time and yet he had experienced the forgiveness of Jesus. And so Peter's example is an encouragement and a hope to everybody who professes to be a follower of Jesus, who claims to be a disciple of Jesus, and yet fails.

Because we see that Jesus forgives, Jesus restores, and Jesus continues to use us despite our failure. And so while Peter tragically failed before Jesus died, what we know of Peter is that he remained a faithful witness to Jesus right up to the end.

[22 : 41] It's thought that Peter was martyred for his faith in Jesus. And so just listen to what Clement of Rome, he wrote this in the first century. Now Clement was a contemporary of the apostles.

I think he was the first early church father. And he put it this way. He said, Let us consider the noble models of our own generation. It was through jealousy and envy that the greatest and most upright pillars of the church were persecuted and struggled unto death.

Let us set before our eyes the good apostles. First of all, Peter, who because of unreasonable jealousy suffered not merely once or twice, but many times.

And having thus given his testimony, went to the place of glory that he deserved. And so we're being told that Peter was persecuted, he suffered, he was tortured, and he was killed because of his faith in Jesus.

So Peter moved from being this tremendous, tragic failure to being this fearless follower of Jesus. So what is the difference?

[23 : 45] How did Peter go from being fearful failure to being fearless follower? Well, only because the good news of Jesus, his death and resurrection, transformed Peter's life.

This gospel of grace that Mark is declaring to us transforms people. So Jesus loved Peter. Jesus died for Peter.

Jesus forgave Peter's sin and Peter's failure. And Jesus restored Peter to a leader of his church. And so Peter would never deny Jesus again.

Because failure is never final with Jesus. And so this gospel, this message of Jesus is good news. It's good news for every single one of us, no matter who we are and no matter what we have done. And so as a follower of Jesus, if you call yourself one, we might have denied Jesus. We may have disobeyed God. We may be devastated right now by our sin.

[24 : 47] And yet, what we're being told here is, that doesn't need to be the end of your story or my story. Of course, we ought to feel guilt and shame for our sin.

Peter did. But that doesn't mean there's no way back for us. And so we might think that God's patience has run out with me. I've gone too far this time.

There is no way God would ever welcome me back. There's no way even God could possibly still love me. Not after what I've done. And yet Jesus went to the cross for you and for me, just as he did for Peter.

Jesus bore the punishment for your every sin, if you're a follower of him. Every sin. And so Jesus wants to assure you of his full forgiveness.

Because that's what Peter experienced. And Jesus wants to restore you to what he calls you to be. A faithful follower of him. And Jesus wants to use you in his service.

[25 : 54] That's why you're his. And so this applies to Christians when we fail. But it also applies to those who may not call themselves a follower of Jesus.

This is also good news for you. It's the best. In fact, it is the only hope for our personal failure. Because your past failure, your present lifestyle, the guilt and the shame that you may feel for what you've done, none of that pushes you beyond the pale with God.

Because you can never be so far away that Jesus can't forgive you and bring you back. Because his death on the cross tells us not only that we desperately need forgiveness, but also that we can, in fact, receive forgiveness.

And that's why we must repent of our sin. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, you must turn from your sin. And you must rejoice in the forgiveness that Jesus can give.

And so can you see why failure is never final with Jesus? No matter how far you have gone in your sin, the love, the mercy, and the grace of God reaches further still.

[27 : 10] If Peter was forgiven, and if Peter was restored, even after denying and cursing Jesus, then there is hope for every single one of us.

And so what should we do? Go to Jesus. Or go back. To Jesus. Weep over your failure. Confess your sin to him.

Know his forgiveness. Experience his grace. Feel his love. Follow him. And tell the good news to everyone else too.

Thank you.